

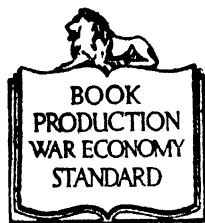
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THE MAN WHO CALLED TOO SOON

by
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TO MY FATHER

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CHAPTER ONE

THE more outspoken of my acquaintances have frequently told me that I, Henry Foster, am a very gullible person, and they have not infrequently added in a most testy manner that to reach the age of nearly forty and still look upon mankind as though they are motivated by a sense of truth and honesty is sheer madness and that I ought to know from experience that it simply asks for trouble in barrow loads.

There is, of course, plenty of truth in this. I regret to say that by no means all the people to whom I have lent a sympathetic ear have told the truth, or what I understand as the truth. But why, on account of these experiences, be they few or many, should I consequently dub the rest of my fellow beings as liars through and through?

For instance, if I were ever down to the lowest dregs, as some people seem to be, and which Heaven forbid, I'd perhaps be only too thankful for a kind-hearted stranger to lend a sympathetic ear. I might even, in such circumstances, be inclined to whine a little . . . who knows until one has been put to the test? I might even melodramatically hint that there was nothing left for me but to make a hole in the river, and it would give me a sense of warmth and comfort and, no doubt, an impetus to fresh endeavour to be begged earnestly to hang on like grim death until the silver lining appeared and, in the meantime, be presented with something a little more concrete to help to tide over the difficult period.

Friends have argued with me that many gain a living

by what they describe as "telling the tale." But be that as it may, if only one of the many tales one listens to happened to be true, it would be terrible to think that perhaps one might have lent a disbelieving ear to a perfectly true story.

I was confirmed in this opinion (or what my friends call my weak-minded way of taking the line of least resistance with every cadger) by an experience I had many years ago when hurrying to catch the homeward train after a hard day at the office of the firm of accountants at which I have worked for so long and into which I have recently been admitted as partner.

It happened to be a dark, wet, and blustery night. There are perhaps none so selfish as a man hurrying to catch his train home on a bad night and I, alas, was no exception on this particular occasion. I knew I should just catch it if I hurried and I was within sight of the station entrance when a man accosted me out of the darkness.

"For God's sake, Mister!" he cried, clutching me by the arm. "Can you help me out? I've come to the end of everything . . . I'm desperate."

Something in his voice, something lost and almost hopeless, tempted me to listen. But I knew I had no small change on me, and I knew, too, that if I missed this train I should have an hour to wait, so I shook off his hand, mumbled something abject about missing my train, and fled into the darkness and caught the train without a second to spare.

I have to confess that I had him on my conscience for quite a while. I am made that way. I am blessed, or cursed, with a disposition which almost seems to merge with other people so that I can almost live what they are saying, no matter how badly they are saying it. My refusal nagged at me for most of the journey to the suburban home where I then lived with my parents.

Here was I, I thought guiltily, a young man in a good job with excellent prospects, the only child of quite well-to-do parents, having all these advantages automatically, and yet too anxious for an extra hour's comfort to risk missing a train to listen sympathetically to a fellow who really did sound desperate, and whose voice sounded as though he had had some sort of education.

I trotted out the usual arguments which people have fired at me again and again. Most of these fellows are good actors. It is their life's work. They work as hard at playing on the sympathy and gullibility of others as a more normal man works at his job. In any case, so the argument goes, there is no need for anybody to starve in England. Aren't the rates burdened with the upkeep of places where these down-and-outs can obtain bed and board? To give indiscriminate charity is simply to encourage a growing parasite class . . . and so on. And as usual it had not the slightest effect on me. I grew guiltier and guiltier the more I argued, and I knew that I could not as a general rule refuse help. I always felt happy when I had listened—and helped. To-night I felt ashamed of myself and miserable. The man's voice seemed to ring in my ears. I could picture him sitting opposite me gazing at me in mute reproach.

I felt even worse in the morning. The incident had almost slipped my mind after a good night's rest, and I was glancing through the morning paper, after eating one of the excellent meals cooked and served by the well-trained servants we always had when my parents were alive, when my attention was suddenly caught by a brief stop-press paragraph :

“ The body of a man of about thirty was recovered from the river near the Southern Railway arches

late last night. His identity is not yet known as he was carrying neither money nor documents. A description will be given in the later editions."

I cannot describe my feelings. I told myself over and over again that it need not be the same man ; that in all probability it was not the same man ; that the Southern Railway had other arches near the river ; but in my heart I felt like a murderer. From that day I vowed that no matter how many times I might have to listen to a professional tale-teller, I'd try to remember that even if only once in a lifetime one helped a genuine case amongst them, then it would be all right. Because I had known that I had nothing less than a pound note last night, I had not paused. How much better to be short of one pound and have a mind at ease, than to have a pound note in one's wallet and the awful mental visions of what one man had done from which it might have saved him !

All this, of course, was many years ago. Things have altered a good deal in my life since then. My parents have died and I live in a different district and am doing well, though I am still a bachelor, for I am that kind of man who does not want second best if he cannot have the girl he really loves. I live quite a happy, if somewhat humdrum life, and I have never forgotten the vow I made to myself many years ago when the body of a man was found drowned at a spot so near where I refused a helping hand. I believe on principle all that my fellow-creatures tell me, just as I hope they will believe all I tell them, for I am a truthful man by nature and it would hurt me to have doubts cast on what I say, particularly to disbelieve the events of what happened recently leading up to the case in which I became so badly involved. I do not disbelieve others for any reason, much less for the reason that their tale sounds

far-fetched. My experience, for what it is worth, is that what sounds far-fetched and quite untrue is really true. It is the smooth and "might-have-happened-to-anyone" stories which so often turn out to be false.

That is the reason I believed Charlie Weekes. . . but I'll begin at the beginning.

I am living now in a fairly large house in one of London's residential suburbs. All the houses are nice, though of varying types and designs, and all of them are detached, surrounded by gardens and trees. The roads are tree-lined and the houses stand well back from the road. I always loved taking an evening walk with Judy, my little Scottie, because at times one might have been in the heart of the country so few people did one meet. The residents are of a type which only emerges in a car to be whisked off at once to London, or to some local social engagement, so that pedestrians seemed at times rarer than cars.

This particular evening was no exception. It was late September and the nights were drawing in. There was already that something in the air which seemed to threaten frost any day now, although the weather still held. I walked along, smoking my pipe, with Judy trotting sedately at my heels. I felt at peace with God and man.

I was about fifteen minutes' walk from my own home when along the secluded road I heard the sound of running footsteps. It was growing dark fairly quickly now and I did not see the man who was running until he was almost upon me. I looked at him with interest, for a running man in these parts is a rarity, there being few buses or trains locally.

He was a man of the lower working-classes, possibly in his late twenties, and it is a long time since I have seen a man so agitated as he was, and the sight of me seemed to bring him suddenly to himself, for he checked

his steps abruptly and came to a halt. His eyes looked wild and I could see he was terribly afraid.

" 'Ere, Guv'nor ! " He jerked out in a hoarse, breathless voice, suddenly thrusting a bulging bag at me. " These belong to ' The Cedars.' I musta been mad ! I swore to Meg as I'd go straight, and I don't know what came over me. P'raps it was that there door being open. But I'll be for it if they know I've been there. It goes against you if you've been in stir once . . . "

I took the bag which he thrust at me. It was a kind of large rexine shopping bag of a cheap quality and very worn. I could not see the contents, but it was heavy and bulging and covered with a sheet of newspaper.

" I swear to God I won't try to pinch another thing as long as I live," he continued, almost with a whimper. He was obviously terrified for the hand that released the bag so willingly was trembling. " I was mad to walk in as I did, but with Meg expecting a kid and being without anything to eat . . . but I swear I did no more than take these off the sideboard. Put them back for me, Mister, and say nothing ! "

He was shaking all over and there were even tears in his eyes. He didn't strike me as being a man with much harm in him and I liked to think that he had repented of his sudden temptation. Having got safely away with the silver, it would be a bigger temptation to hang on to it.

I nodded and slipped some silver in his hand. He seemed somewhat reluctant to take it, but then, as if remembering something, he grabbed at it and, with almost incoherent thanks, vanished into the darkness.

I felt not a little amused by the incident. Had the poor fellow but known it, my cousin, Cyril Loder, lived at " The Cedars." I thought it would be quite a situa-

tion to walk in with his choice sideboard silver. Not that I have ever liked Cyril. In fact, I have to be quite firm with myself to keep from actively disliking him. He is very comfortably off, but he has a reputation for meanness and hardness which is very difficult to contradict. But then, I must admit candidly, I am very prejudiced against him. I would like to think better of him for Harriet's sake, but ten years ago Harriet chose him in preference to me, so he must have an attractive side to his character. For that matter, he is a handsome, well-set-up man. He is much taller than I, and he is dark-haired and dark-eyed and with a definitely handsome moulding of his face, whereas I am of medium height and of a mid-brown, almost indeterminate colouring. Nobody notices me particularly, but everybody notices Cyril. I understand that women have always been attracted to him ; but I have never cared for him at all, even in the years long before either of us knew Harriet. I don't think he troubles to have any opinion about me at all. He simply takes me for a weak-minded fool.

Some of these thoughts were running through my head as I approached " The Cedars." Cyril and Harriet, or one of them must surely be somewhere about, I thought. It was a wonder that any thief could get in and out under Cyril's gimlet eye, and any poor wretch could expect short shrift at his hands. I made up my mind that I would not recollect the repentant thief too clearly. Not a difficult business for I had been too taken aback to notice him much, except as I have described him to you, and it was getting dark quickly.

The door of " The Cedars " still swung wide and with this exception the place appeared as its usual trim and smug self. I visited there as rarely as necessary. I complimented myself that this visit might free me of a further duty visit for several weeks.

I stepped into the hall surprised at a sudden feeling of emptiness about the place. There was usually a rich smell of cigar smoke ; the sound of distant voices, even occasional laughter, and invariably a maid or two hovering discreetly in the background. Cyril was the type of man who likes a big domestic staff. He was all for appearance ; it was mainly in the smaller, or more hidden things, where I had so often found out the mean streak in him.

I realised all at once as I hesitated in the hall wondering whether or not to ring the bell, that perhaps it would be as well to slip into the dining-room and replace the silver without saying a word to anybody about it. Apparently it had not yet been missed, and knowing Cyril as I did I hardly thought he would appreciate the situation. He would stamp and rave and vow that the man had recognised me as a relative and had panicked. Cyril would not appreciate the Repentant Thief touch. He would 'phone for the police, get all finger-print minded, and have the owner of a shabby rexine shopping bag dug out from whatever mean resting-place he could afford for himself and his expectant Meg.

I had no sooner thought of this than I acted. The massive sideboard was at right-angles to the dining-room door as I entered and it had a strangely bereft air about it. One very large central ornament remained, obviously too large to be easily portable, but it had lost its shining magnificence. I felt rather friendly towards the man who had effected this desolation. I regretted that Cyril's big jaw would not drop in surprised consternation at the unexpected sight.

Carefully I replaced everything in position, so far as I could remember the different items to have stood, then I carefully folded up the rexine bag and placed it in my capacious overcoat pocket.

It was then that my attention was attracted by Judy. She had sauntered casually into the room in my wake, hesitating just inside the door as though waiting encouragement for entering further, when I noticed that she stiffened and every hair on her coat seemed to stand suddenly on end. Then she did a most amazing thing for an elderly and always sedate animal. She literally leapt from the room uttering a queer kind of half-howl and half-yelp.

I turned with surprise to find out what had caused such agitation, expecting to see at least an army of cats, for Judy has always disliked them, then I, too, stiffened suddenly and was horribly conscious of a creepy sensation down my spine.

For there in the corner, half hidden by the heavy window hangings, was the huddled figure of Cyril Loder. I knew he was dead at a first glance, but why should I immediately have been so certain that he had been murdered?

Alas! One judges these things by one's own secret impulses. There have been times when I could have murdered him.

As I stood simply staring at the corpse without approaching any closer to it, I was conscious of only one feeling. It was a feeling neither of relief nor sorrow, but simply stark fear. I had known for a long time that Harriet had not been happy with him; not that she had ever even hinted at such a thing to me, she was the type of woman to stand by a bad bargain and try to appear as though she had made a good one. But I knew. I had known for the ten years that she had been married to him that disillusionment must have come quickly and that humiliation must have been piled on secret humiliation as the years progressed. It must have been heart-breaking for her fresh and happy nature to be married to him, coarse brute that he was beneath

his veneer. Had she waited until she had grown a little older, I am sure she would have seen through him, but she was only nineteen at the time of his tempestuous wooing and young for her years. Now she looks much older than her years. I always think that people who keep their troubles to themselves age quicker than those who are so ready to burden others with them.

But to those who cannot or will not give some outward expression to their inward grief, there is an unnatural tension ; one that must sooner or later snap with far-reaching consequences.

I moved out into the hall and closed the dining-room door firmly. Then I went to the front door and rang the bell. There was no answer for a long time—another unusual feature of this unusual visit. Doors mostly opened at “ The Cedars ” as if by magic. But at length, as I stood inside the hall listening intently, I thought I heard the sound of footsteps approaching from some distant upper quarter of the house, and surely enough I soon saw Harriet herself approaching round the bend of the wide staircase.

“ Why, Henry ! ” she exclaimed. “ You of all people ! Fancy you appearing like this at such a time.”

She seemed excited and incoherent. I thought she looked as though she had been crying, which also was most unusual, and there were two unnaturally bright spots of colour on her pale cheeks.

“ Where are all the servants ? ” I enquired formally to cover the awkward gap which followed, for she seemed distressed to see me and was obviously hesitating what to do about my unexpected visit.

“ Oh, I suppose you’ll have to know, Henry,” she replied haltingly. “ Things have not been too good between Cyril and me for a long time. The servants were all sent away this morning. I am only here to supervise the removal of my things, but practically

everything has gone now. The furniture is going into storage to-morrow, but that is none of my business."

I stared at her. I found it hard to concentrate my thoughts on what she was saying. Did she, could she, know about Cyril?

"Have you been here alone?" I asked abruptly.

"Oh, no!" she replied, turning suddenly and powdering round her eyes carefully, with her back to me. "Cyril was here until a short time ago—no doubt to make sure that I did not take more than was my pound of flesh," she added with a bitterness that startled me. It was the very first time she had ever said anything against her husband.

"And Ellen was with me, too, most of the time," she added hastily as if regretting this little revelation. "But she went on ahead with the last of the big cases to get things ready at the flat. I have only a few small cases now. Perhaps you wouldn't mind 'phoning for a taxi for me, Henry."

For a moment I was tempted. What about getting a taxi quite innocently-seeming and locking up the house? Perhaps the body would not be discovered for ages—at least for quite long enough for any necessary alibis for Harriet to be concocted.

The temptation was easily resisted. I knew I would never be able to stand the suspense of waiting until somebody found the body. Besides, I had got to know the truth.

"Harriet!" I said abruptly. "Where is Cyril?"

She turned suddenly and stared at me. A little of her agitation had subsided, but her lovely grey-blue eyes looked strained as though she had been through an ordeal. Her dark hair, which was usually so beautifully kept, certainly needed attention. The loose locks gave her face a wild appearance as she returned my anxious gaze.

"I don't know," she said sharply. "He was here up to about half-an-hour or so ago. He's probably gone out. He'll be staying at his club if you want to contact him. But, please, Henry! Keep away from him. I don't want any more trouble than I have already had," she finished in a low voice.

I felt an immense surge of relief. Suddenly I was sure that she knew nothing about what was in the dining-room. With that knowledge I felt I could face anything. I was ashamed of my former suspicions, but perhaps only I had known how far she had been driven. I also knew how I, easy-going and tolerant as I am, had felt at times towards him.

"I'm afraid you're not free of trouble yet by a long way, Harriet," I said compassionately. "Something rather terrible has happened. Cyril is dead."

I saw real fear in her face then.

"Henry!" she cried clutching my arm. "You've not done anything stupid? You weren't here when he . . ."

She broke off and turned away to master her emotion once more.

"What exactly do you mean?" she asked in a muffled voice with head averted. "Where is he?"

"He is lying dead in the dining-room," I said bluntly. I could think of no other way of putting it. "I think he has been murdered. There's blood . . ."

She stood as still as death for a few moments, then turned again towards me, her eyes, dark with anxiety, searching my face.

"I can't think it was you, Henry," she said in a troubled voice. "But I am afraid . . . I know how he can drive the best-intentioned people to madness. Don't be afraid to tell me the truth," she finished. "I might be able to think of something."

I felt a glow round my heart. She was thinking of

me and how to shield me if I had done such a rash thing, just as I had been ready to shield her ; aye, and to get rid of the body, too, if it could be done. I do not condone murder, not even of such a brute as Cyril Loder, but if Harriet had done it I knew that nobody but I would understand how far she had been driven and that she had not really been responsible.

" I did not kill him, Harriet—at least, not in fact, though I often felt murder towards him in my heart. I was sorely afraid . . . "

I broke off. She saw what I meant.

" The two most likely people, eh, Henry ? "

A queer smile twisted her lips for a fleeting second, then she said :

" If you say you did not kill him, I know you did not, but who did ? You say he is dead and that there is blood, might it not be suicide ? With a man of his moody disposition anything is possible."

Hope rose in me. I had not thought of suicide, and almost instinctively we both moved towards the dining-room door.

Harriet's face was deathly white as she stood close to me looking down at the body of the man she must have grown to hate with all her heart. She was never an emotional type and she had had ten years in which to learn how to mask her feelings perfectly, but I could see that the strain of this shock, coming as it did on top of everything else, was almost more than she could bear.

" He—he's been shot . . . " she faltered, " and the gun is nowhere near. It can hardly be suicide, can it ? You've not picked up the gun, have you Henry ? Nothing ought to be touched, you know."

" No, I've touched nothing at this side of the room," I replied. " I don't think I'd have seen him at all if it hadn't been for Judy's behaviour."

"But surely I ought to have heard the shot," she frowned anxiously. "He could not have been long dead when you came. Did you hear anything, Henry? How long exactly have you been here and what made you look inside the dining-room? We ought to ring for the police, I suppose," she rushed on somewhat breathlessly as she led the way out of the room, "but it would be as well to sort things out in our minds first. We must be quick, though,"

I knew well enough what was in her mind. It was no secret that I still loved Harriet and had loved her even before she had married Cyril Loder.

I told her what had brought me to the house.

"No wonder the poor chap was so agitated," I mused. "He'd be afraid of being had up for murder as well a theft."

Harriet stared at me for a stupefied moment, then she gave a queer, hysterical laugh.

"A thief asked you to return the silver?" she exploded, "and you did. Just like that?"

"Of course," I replied. "I thought it would be a good joke on Cyril. Then I changed my mind and decided I would replace it without saying anything. Cyril wouldn't have rested till he'd got hold of the unfortunate devil."

I unfolded the worn bag from my pocket.

"And here's the evidence," I added.

She stared at it and at me. She still seemed disposed to laugh hysterically, but she was taking a firm grip on herself. The story did seem a bit queer in face of our grim discovery.

"But, Henry, you stupid, chivalrous idiot!" she cried. "Don't you see that that man might have been robbing the house and Cyril found him in the act of taking the stuff away. The man might have been desperate and fired. That seems the logical answer to

this mystery. We shall be all right, Henry! We shall both be all right. It was robbery with violence . . ."

She did in her relief now begin to laugh hysterically.

I had to take her by the arm and shake her to quieten her.

"Listen, Harriet!" I said tensely. "That is not the explanation. That man, whoever he was, did not do it. I'll swear to that. It was the open door which tempted him in, and he got a bad scare when he saw what he did. He just panicked, then when he got outside he knew he was hopelessly incriminated if he took away the silver."

"Oh, Henry!" she said a little impatiently. "That's just supposition. You ought anyway to be glad that you'll have his evidence. At least the police will know that you didn't get there until after he was killed. They'll be more inclined to suspect the housebreaker."

I did not say what was in my mind. Once I as a suspect was eliminated, everything would focus on Harriet. The man was obviously not the type to carry a gun, and he was small and under-nourished. Cyril could have tucked him under his arm. Besides, it looked to me as though Cyril had been shot from behind, so that promptly hit Harriet's theory on the head.

"I do not think he had anything to do with the murder," I said tersely, "and I don't want him dragged in for nothing. Later, if things get desperate, I shall try to contact him again. He seemed more terrified of his wife finding out his lapse than the police. I'll give the poor beggar a chance to go straight. Being mixed up in this might finish him. I liked the little chap somehow."

Harriet stared at me helplessly. Again she struggled with a desire to laugh hysterically.

"Perhaps you are right, Henry," she said in a queer, strangled voice. "After all, the police don't know you

like I do. Perhaps they would not for a minute believe your story about being asked to put back the silver. It does sound fantastic, you know, but it is typically you. Still, we shall be dealing with the cold, hard matter-of-fact minions of the law. You must say that you were taking Judy for a walk and called in, as you sometimes do. While you ring for the police, Henry, I shall rub over the silver you brought back so that your finger-prints aren't all over the place. I don't suppose your repentant thief left any of his. He would be no amateur at the game."

I got through to the police quickly and knew that it would only be a matter of minutes before they were at the house. On a sudden impulse, I walked out of the front door and called to Judy, but she was reluctant to enter the house. It was then that I noticed that the side window of the dining-room was half-open and I crossed the little strip of lawn and searched keenly in the bushes below.

Very soon I found what I had hoped to discover. A revolver had either been tossed through the open window into the bushes, or the shot fired from outside and the weapon dropped. My heart missed a beat as I picked the deadly weapon up with my handkerchief.

It was a small revolver, almost a toy it seemed, and I knew Harriet had once possessed a similar one.

Swiftly I wrapped it in the handkerchief and carefully folded it inside the old rexine bag until I had made a neat packet. The police would be here any moment now. Where could I hide it?

I caught sight of Judy, obviously anxious to be gone.

"Here, Judy!" I coaxed. "Take this home. Home girl and keep it till I come. That's a good girl! Straight home now!"

I led her to the gate and pointed down the road in the direction she knew well enough. Judy is an obedient

and well-trained animal ; I knew I could rely on her to take the packet home quietly and guard it until I returned.

She needed no second bidding. There was nothing at all sedate about the way she hurried down the deserted road. She was only too anxious to get away from the house of violence and death.

I thought hard for a few seconds then hurried back to the house.

" Harriet," I said as soon as I saw her. " Did Cyril keep a diary or engagement book of any sort ? "

" He used to make a note of his engagements," she nodded, " but it would probably be in his coat pocket."

I entered the dining-room and crossed again to the big, crumpled body of Cyril Loder. Gingerly I opened his jacket and saw his wallet and another slim book in the inside pocket. This latter I withdrew carefully, using my handkerchief in case it was something I ought to put back. But I soon saw it was a record of various engagements and other things and somehow I felt that it would be of more use to me, knowing Cyril as I did, than to the police.

No doubt I was quite wrong in this ; the specialist is usually miles ahead of the amateur. But I suffered from a very common failing. I felt that Harriet was more to me than to anyone else, therefore I also had the strong feeling that I could do more for her than could any other person, no matter how clever.

I thought it was going to be quite simple to find out who killed Cyril Loder.

CHAPTER TWO

I FELT I was rather fortunate in knowing Sergeant Wrigley so well and that he was one of the two police-

men who turned up in response to my telephone call. He knew I was in the habit of taking Judy a stroll at that time of night and, creature of habit that I am, that I usually followed the same old track, timing it to be out about three-quarters of an hour. I simply told him that I had been out with Judy, had seen the front door of "The Cedars" swinging wide open, and had taken the opportunity of calling to pay my respects as *I did occasionally*. I said I was surprised that there was nobody about and that it wasn't until Judy went nosing into the dining-room that I suspected anything untoward. I described Judy's reactions which had drawn my attention to the body of Cyril Loder.

I added that I had then rung the bell hard to see if anyone at all was in the house and that Mrs. Loder had eventually come from some distant upper quarter. I made things out as well as I could for Harriet, but this part was difficult seeing that Harriet herself had admitted that she had been on the point of leaving her husband for good.

I don't think at the time that Sergeant Wrigley knew I was Cyril Loder's cousin, much less that I had at one time courted Harriet and had never looked at another woman since. But I insisted that for my sake he should go through my pockets before he gave me permission to go home. He was grateful for my suggestion, because, being a policeman, he had to allow for the incalculable. I might have had a gun on me—there certainly was one missing—and the police do not take things for granted, even when dealing with people they have known for a long time as mild and inoffensive.

The diary he naturally took to be mine since it had no name on it. I could not help feeling a little elated that I could thus so openly display what might prove useful evidence and it soothed my active conscience a little so far as the gun was concerned. It bolstered up

the feeling that my anxiety for Harriet's well-being might keep me one ahead of the police all the time.

Harriet was allowed to go to her flat eventually, but only eventually. I loitered until I could accompany her there. We were both glad to see the back of the house. It seemed as if it could never have belonged to a woman like Harriet and the police appeared to fit in better and more easily than Harriet had ever done.

I managed to get a taxi and escorted Harriet back to her flat. I accepted her invitation to enter as she wanted me there when she broke the news to Ellen. Since the maid had been present up to so short a time before Cyril's death, we knew she would be questioned closely, and as she was the type of girl who meant well but talked too much, a few words in season would not, I thought, be wasted. She was devoted to Harriet and would do anything to help her.

But, alas! The police were far ahead of me here. Sergeant Wrigley, I should imagine, will be an inspector after this case. He is extremely shrewd and gentlemanly. How, when, or where he tipped off anyone to visit the flat, I do not know. I cannot even remember how he extracted the address from Harriet, as he must surely have done in the course of his questionings. I began to feel sorry about the revolver. Perhaps, after all, Sergeant Wrigley would be the better man to have the handling of it, even though Harriet could be nothing more to him than a likely suspect.

"Oh, ma'am!" cried Ellen, rushing out almost before we were in the tiny hall of the flat. "I am that glad to see you. I thought you was in prison. Oh, what a terrible thing . . ."

She would have gone on in this strain indefinitely had not Harriet asked quietly:

"What are you talking about, Ellen? Surely you don't know anything about what has happened?"

" I was as innocent as a babe unborn, ma'am, until the plain-clothes policeman called. I was struck all of a heap, I can tell you, when he told me Mr. Loder had been murdered. ' And what if he has ? ' I ups and says. ' He wasn't fit to live, the way he treated his wife, and her the best woman that ever lived. If she's done it, he drove her to it, and that's the gospel truth . . . ' "

" Listen, Ellen," I cut in, " you had no need, you know, to say these things to anybody. Surely he didn't ask you outright if you thought your mistress had done such a thing ! "

" Oh, no ! But I could see what was in his mind," Ellen rushed on. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she had obviously been weeping copiously, judging by her crumpled apron and the wet ball of a handkerchief in her hand. She had always had the heartiest dislike for Cyril, knowing that he " carried on " as she termed it. And she had overheard a good deal of the unpleasant scenes and Cyril's foul language in that last scene between husband and wife. As I listened, not a little dazed by Ellen's ceaseless torrent of words, I could not help reflecting that devotion can sometimes be as damaging as hate. Ellen's main reaction to the news the policeman had brought had apparently been that it was a wonder Harriet had not turned on her tormentor many years before.

" I told him I'd felt like murdering him many times when he's been on at her. ' He drove her further than what I'd have stuck if he'd been my husband,' I said. ' She must have acted in self-defence. Why, he even struck her whilst I was there ; she's sometimes been black and blue.' "

Ellen let herself rip. Harriet and I listened to her, anxious to know just how much had been said. It was obvious that Ellen had tried to do as much as she could

according to her lights to help her mistress, but it simply had not occurred to her that perhaps someone else might have killed Cyril Loder.

I could not help sympathising with Ellen as she let cat after cat out of divers bags. I knew only too well what it felt like to want to murder the brute and how fatally easy it was to imagine that the helpless victim, driven beyond control, had at last turned on its tormentor.

Things were rapidly becoming blacker and blacker for Harriet, as I had known they would. The police would have motive and opportunity tabulated against her up to now. Thank goodness! I thought in sudden fervour, bolstering up my guilty conscience, that I had found the revolver in time. If it really were Harriet's, and I had an uneasy feeling that it was, then it would be as cut-and-dried a case against her as one could wish.

"Why didn't you send for me, madam?" Ellen ended her recitation in tearful passion. "I could have helped you to bury the body in the cellar and then nobody need never have known."

Ellen, I need hardly add, was an avid reader of that class of weekly in which bodies are buried in cellars at such a rate as to make one wonder whether there is a body-free cellar left in the country.

"But I did not kill him, Ellen," Harriet said gently, her voice sounding strangely cool and composed after Ellen's mostly emotional display.

This simple statement of fact took Ellen's speech away for quite a minute. Her red-rimmed eyes grew wider and wider, and her mouth sagged foolishly. She was quite a pretty, dark-haired girl normally, but now she looked most unattractive.

"You . . . you didn't do it, ma'am?" she stuttered. "Then, thank God for that!" she cried, seizing on this new situation at once with huge relief and gusto.

"Then you won't be hung, after all, but thanks be that somebody else did it, for it's good riddance to bad rubbish, I say."

"That will do, Ellen," Harriet said rather sharply.

"You must not speak like that. Things will be far from easy for me at the best, so it will be better if you say as little as possible. Just because *I* say I did not kill my husband, it does not follow that the police or *others will believe me until the real criminal is found.*"

The logic of this dawned on Ellen swiftly. Only too frequently had she sobbed over stories where the long-suffering heroine has taken the rap for somebody else.

She retired to her kitchen very subdued. It had obviously occurred to her that if she had been paid handsomely by the villain of one of the aforesaid stories to give her mistress away, whilst pretending to defend her, she could not better have succeeded.

I did not stay long at the flat, but left shortly after Ellen's subdued exit. I tried to reassure Harriet, telling her confidently that we had quickly had the police on the trail, and that the whole case would soon be cleared up.

But as I walked slowly homeward I could not help my very uneasy conscience questioning me what good it had been to put the police early on the trail if I had confused that said trail by hiding some of the evidence.

I determined to examine the revolver the minute I got home. I would know at a glance if it were Harriet's or not for it had been notched for bull's-eyes in the long ago when we had sometimes practised our skill. The marks had only been faint scratches. I'd forgotten them at the time I'd picked up the revolver outside Cyril's window, or I could have looked then. It's odd what important things the mind forgets at a crucial moment. I really ought to have remembered that, but then I am the sort of man who thinks of really brilliant

repartee long after he has given dull and uninspiring rejoinders.

The first thing I did when I entered the hall of my snug, solidly built bachelor home was to call for Judy, but to my surprise there was not the usual scampering response. Instead of which, Gell, my elderly manservant appeared. Gell and his wife more or less manage things for me and are an honest hard-working couple, though they had not been used to service when *I had first lent them a helping hand*. It is, however, *only in superficial matters where they fall short, and these matter little to me when I find I can rely on people in the main.*

"Miss Dawson has arrived!" he announced. He had never got into the habit of saying "sir." Not that I had ever pressed him to. He sometimes honoured me by ending a question or statement with "Mr. Foster," but in the main his conversation was unadorned. I was quite relieved that he had dropped addressing me as "Guv'nor" or "Guv" as he had done when he had first come under my roof. It had been hard enough work to break him of that without complicating matters by giving him an unfamiliar word in its place.

On the heels of his announcement came Joyce Dawson herself tripping lightly into view. I felt that her visit was not exactly opportune, fond enough though I was of my ward.

"Hello, Guardy!" she greeted me in the old familiar way, but without the usual kiss, I noticed. Instead she shook me warmly and affectionately by the hand.

"You look very well, Joyce," I said, knowing that she appreciated notice of herself and what she was wearing. "You look quite the beautiful young lady of fashion. Where's the schoolgirl gone to?"

"Dead and buried years ago," she said, linking her arm into mine. "And so she ought, seeing that I'm

dot, I says to Gell : ' Mark my words, we'll be 'earing something.' "

How Mrs. Gell would revel in these ghoulish imaginings when she knew what really had happened !

I was more than alarmed. Knowing what Judy had been carrying I was conscious of a kind of cold, clammy feeling at the thought that perhaps she may have been waylaid by the police. After the smart way they had acted where Ellen was concerned, I felt ready for any ingenuity on their part. I began to wish I had not interfered with the revolver, or any other evidence. If Judy had been taken to the police station carrying such valuable evidence and identified as my dog, then both Harriet's position and mine would be worse than ever.

My uneasy thoughts were interrupted by a resigned comment from Joyce :

" Well, dinner has waited so long, another half-hour won't hurt. I'll come and help you find her, Guardy," she said with a brave effort at cheerfulness.

I tried to smile reassuringly at her.

" Oh, that's all right, my dear. Judy's such a good dog I know she wouldn't just be idling round. Something must have happened, so I'll 'phone through to the police and try to find out if they know anything about her. They're sure to if she's had an accident. Then I'll join you in the dining-room."

" She's 'ad an accident, like as not," I heard Mrs. Gell mutter darkly. " I only 'opes as how she isn't 'alf dead somewhere in the road with nobody to see 'er and put 'er out of 'er misery."

She disappeared into the kitchen in a state of miserable happiness. Mrs. Gell is one of those plump pale-faced women who might easily have been cheerful had it not been for something inside them which urged them towards the gloomy and tragic happenings of life.

The only time she ever put herself out to take even an hour off from her conscientiously industrious life, was when there was a local funeral. I dreaded these funerals. Nobody ever wished his fellow men a longer life than I did on that account. Mrs. Gell was such a good cook and manager that I felt obliged to lend a sympathetic ear to her full accounts of everything on the few times she did take time off. And woe betide any poor widow or widower who did not display ostentatious grief.

"If you ask me anything," she would end darkly, "that death was a little opportune. Just a little too opportune."

Mrs. Gell occasionally got hold of a good word and made the most of it. Likewise long and quite complicated sentences of a sensational nature would roll perfectly from her tongue when she was quoting her favourite paper.

As I made my way towards my study to telephone to the police, I sighed as I thought of the sensations ahead. Perhaps I ought to forewarn Mrs. Gell, I wondered uneasily. She would go about for at least three days with a look of reproach in her eyes if I did not at least give her a hint.

I dialled the number of the police station after carefully closing my study door, and I was lucky enough eventually to contact Sergeant Wrigley himself. I felt that a boldly innocent attack would be my best weapon.

"An odd thing has happened, Sergeant," I said. "I told you about my little dog being upset by her discovery and that was what drew my attention to the tragedy. Well, she must have run off home—she's a terribly sensitive little thing—she was nowhere about when I left. I did not worry until I got home and found that she had not been back at all. I am hoping she

hasn't met with an accident. Has anything been reported ? "

I waited in a state of painful suspense. I fully expected a cold response to the effect that my dog was at the police station having been discovered taking away some valuable evidence from the scene of the crime.

But to my immeasurable relief, his voice was as friendly as ever when he replied :

" No, Mr. Foster ! I should know your dog at once, of course. And she's so well trained, and these roads are so quiet one would hardly suppose she has met with an accident. I'll 'phone you at once if any news comes in. Perhaps she's been put out of her usual stride. Dogs are queer animals at times."

I thanked him, not knowing whether to feel relieved or not, but I could not explain to myself why Judy had not reached home when I had ordered her to come straight here. I felt there was something badly wrong. If she had been run over, then she would have the incriminating evidence with her, and the fatal hour was only delayed.

Uneasily I returned to the dining-room, worried about Judy to whom I was very much attached, and worried still more, for Harriet's sake, about what would happen if it were found by others what Judy had been carrying home.

" No luck ? " Joyce asked sympathetically as I joined her at table.

I shook my head. I wondered how she could eat so heartily as I myself made valiant efforts to force some food down.

" Wrigley is going to let me know if they get any news of her," I said, trying to speak cheerfully. " Judy is such a good little animal I don't think she would depart from her usual route home. Perhaps she was waiting for me."

" But didn't you come back your usual way ? " Joyce asked, widening her very expressive blue eyes.

" No ! I saw Mrs. Loder home first," I replied unthinkingly.

" Aunt Harriet ? " There was surprise in Joyce's voice as she uttered the name, but she went on swiftly : " Still, I thought you always took Judy her walk in that direction, so that doesn't account for it, does it ? "

" Mrs. Loder is no longer living at ' The Cedars,' " I said, trying to keep my voice casual. " She has taken a flat."

This seemed a bit of a bombshell to Joyce. Naturally, being my ward since she was eleven, and with Cyril being my cousin, she knew a good deal about them both.

Joyce continued her meal in unaccustomed silence. The silence grew a little oppressive, so I said, to try and make things more normal :

" Why didn't you send a wire that you were coming, Joyce ? I thought that you intended taking up a teaching appointment this term, so this visit is very unexpected. Not that I am not delighted to see you at any time, but I like to be able to prepare a little *fatted calf* for your visits."

I might mention that since she has graduated, Joyce has been spending most of her time with some distant relatives. Before then she was at Oxford, and previous to that she was at a boarding school. Mrs. Gell was very attached to her, because Joyce was of a type which seems to know the best way of talking to other people, no matter what their interests may be. My home was Joyce's, if she needed it, but the girl was so popular that she always seemed to have invitations somewhere or another and we saw far too little of her.

" I came on the impulse of the moment," she replied, but her manner seemed suddenly to have lost its eager warmth. " I hope you don't mind ? "

"Why, Joyce!" I spoke a little sharply. "This is your home, my dear. You are one of the family."

She smiled a little and for a moment she looked vaguely wistful. At that moment I thought how beautiful she had grown, and how fresh and young she looked. Her golden-brown hair was done in a becoming way and there was a healthy, natural colour in her cheeks. I suddenly felt quite proud of her and wished for a moment that she really were my own daughter. A little sentimentally I began to ponder on what one missed if one did not marry young and have a family. This thought led me on to wonder whether Joyce missed her mother and father. No doubt there had been times when she had missed them terribly, particularly her mother.

"Yes," she said seriously. "I like to look on this as my home. I've always been very happy here."

Which seemed a strange speech for Joyce, who still seemed a child to me. I hoped that our former light-hearted relationship was not going to become more formal. I was conscious for a moment of a vague disquiet on top of the other disturbing things which were troubling my mind. Fervently I hoped that Joyce had not been trying to find out anything about her inheritance. That was a bogy which would one day have to be faced!

When we had finished our very belated meal and had retired to the warmth and comfort of the drawing-room, Joyce began suddenly to chatter to me in her old, easy way of what she proposed to do and exactly what kind of an appointment she was interested in obtaining.

I tried to concentrate on what she was saying, but fond though I was of her and deeply though I was interested in her career and happiness, my mind could not keep off worrying about the murder and Judy's strange disappearance—and Harriet.

At length, Joyce broke off abruptly and said :

“ Is it Judy you’re so anxious about ? ”

I started, very guiltily, hating her to think I had not been giving her my undivided attention.

“ I do feel a bit uneasy, Joyce,” I admitted, “ but that is far from being the only thing . . . ”

I knew it would be in the papers to-morrow morning, and Joyce would think it odd that I had not told her anything, so very briefly I told her of the tragedy, not mentioning anything about the stolen silver, nor about my duplicity with the revolver and diary.

She sat very still as she listened. Her eyes seemed to grow suddenly dark and the colour drained slowly from her cheeks.

“ I’m sorry it’s upsetting you, Joy,” I ended simply. “ But you would have to know sooner or later. It’s a terrible thing for Harriet.”

“ And here I’ve been chattering away about myself,” she cried in acute self-reproach, “ while you’ve had all this on your mind. Oh, Guardy ! I do hope it’s not going to be dreadful for you and Aunt Harriet.”

“ One cannot escape unpleasantness where there is a murder,” I said, trying not to sound too worried.

“ But that might explain about Judy ! ” Joyce pointed out eagerly. “ She knew Uncle Cyril and Aunt Harriet so well, and dogs often act funny where there is death or violence. Let’s go out and look for her. Perhaps the poor little thing is wandering miserably about waiting for you.”

I was relieved to follow her suggestion. It was now quite dark but the young moon was beginning to light up the sky.

With the exception of an occasional whistle such as Judy would recognise, we trod the accustomed route silently. I speculated idly as to why I had always taken exactly the same road. Was I such a creature of habit ?

Did I entirely lack imagination? Or was I simply drawn to the quarter which housed Harriet? Even if the latter had been the case, there were many other roads which led in that direction. What an awful rut I seemed to have got into of late years, I thought in sudden perplexity. Had I always been such a conventional stick-in-the-mud?

Well, I was being shaken out of that now, I thought grimly. Gone completely was the comfortable rut. Instead of which I had been doing criminal things that very evening. Helping a thief, hiding evidence of a murder, removing a diary from the murdered man . . .

"What are you laughing at?" Joyce's voice sounded vaguely anxious as it interrupted my thoughts.

"I didn't know I had laughed," I replied, startled, and decided to keep my mind on my quest for Judy. But at that moment a hoarse and vaguely familiar voice addressed me out of the shadow of the trees:

"Can you spare a minute, Guv'nor?"

My heart leaped. Surely it was the repentant thief?

"Walk on a few paces," I said hurriedly to Joyce. "I won't keep you long."

"The dawg, Guv'nor. Are you looking for the dawg?" he asked in the hoarse whisper which seemed to be his natural way of speaking.

"Why, yes!" I replied relieved to have news. "Have you seen her?"

He was obviously bursting with his news. I could not help feeling sorry for him because he still had not got over the shock he had received earlier in the evening. He seemed very agitated and upset.

"I'm grateful to you, Guv'nor," he said simply. "But I was that struck I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't drag myself away. I've bin 'ere ever since 'oping to 'ave a word with you. When I saw

the dawg coming with my bag folded up in 'er mouth, I tried to call to 'er but she took no notice, just went straight on. I thought it was pukker of you to get rid of it before the police came. I followed the dawg a bit, aimless like, when all of a sudden a car came down the road and ran the pore little thing down almost as if it 'ad been a-purpose. I was a good bit away, but a man 'ops out in a flash, picks up the dog, and before I knew what 'as 'appened 'e 'ad popped it in the car and it was off like a flash."

I was quite taken aback by this unexpected news. I could think of nothing to say at all except :

"What sort of a car was it? Did you take the number?"

"I was that struck, Guv'nor," he said in hoarse earnestness, "it sort of 'appened before I knew wot was 'appening, if you get my meaning. It was a big black saloon car, but as to the number . . ." He gave a gesture as if to emphasise his own general uselessness. "I'm short-sighted at the best of times, and when I'm excited things kind of run into each other. The best I could make of it was that it looked like an 'L' at the beginning and '2' at the end."

"It wasn't—could you tell—if it was a police car?" I asked anxiously.

The repentant thief was very definite in his reply. I rather gathered that he would know a police car even if it were operating under the guise of a steam-roller.

I thanked him and told him that he had saved me the trouble of unnecessary searching.

"My address is on the dog's collar," I said, "so surely the people who picked her up will communicate with me. By the way," I finished, "I shall keep you out of this if it is humanly possible, but just in case things get difficult it would help if I had your name and address. You see, the dead man happened to be my

cousin, and with me seeming more or less to find the body, things might be awkward."

Which put the poor little man in another flutter. He mopped his brow, swore again that the man was dead when he got there and begged me to believe him and not bring his name into it.

"Things are tough enough for me and Meg as it is, Guv'nor," he pleaded. "I've brought it on meself, I know, but it's taught me, good and proper it 'as. I didn't mean to walk in like I did, but it was food I was thinkin' of and Meg 'adn't 'ad a decent meal for weeks . . ."

"I've promised you I won't bring your name into it unless I am absolutely forced," I said gently. "I'll try to get to the bottom of this myself, but I don't want to lose touch with you. Look here, if you are out of a job I can give you a temporary one as handy-man about the garden and house if necessary, at least long enough to set you on your feet."

His thanks were voluble. A chance was all he wanted he repeated again and again, intermingled with his almost tearful thanks. I had to cut him short as Joyce was standing about waiting. I found out that his name was Charlie Weekes, and my last word to him was to try to remember anybody or anything he had seen in the vicinity of Cyril Loder's home before he had entered it.

"You'll be able to think things over in between now and the morning," I assured him. "And don't worry. It will probably be quite a simple thing to solve."

"Well?" Joyce demanded when I rejoined her. "I fully expected you to shout for help. He looked a somewhat desperate character judging from his furtive air and hoarse voice."

"Oh, he's harmless enough. He gave me news of

right word and the right action never seem to come to me at the right time. I usually know what ought to have been done or said hours after the opportunity has gone by.

I still had the diary. Ought I to return that somehow to Cyril's home ?

I hesitated.

I suppose there is nothing more irritating than a person who is unable to make up his mind on vital matters, but there it was. For the life of me I could not make up my mind what to do for the best.

"Here we are!" Joyce's vigorous young voice interrupted my uneasy thoughts. "And if there's no news about Judy I shall feel like raising Cain."

"Oh, by the way, Joyce!" I said hurriedly, as a means of deflecting her a little from this, "I really think we ought to drop some sort of a hint to Mrs. Gell, don't you? I mean, there might be atmospheres and things for days if we wait for the papers to tell her."

Joyce rose to this at once.

"And she needn't know how long you've kept it under your hat, Guardy," she agreed affectionately, "it'll look as though we've just discovered it. Time's nothing to Gelly-belly. Leave her to me. I'll lead her to think you're too stricken to talk about it. Just throw her a hint in passing, and I'll regale her in the kitchen, leaving you to browse over the accumulation of mysteries in secret."

The Gells were hovering around the hall and came forward anxiously to see if we had Judy. No news had, apparently, come through about her.

"It's one thing on top of another, Mrs. Gell!" I said heavily. "I can understand your forebodings, now. I've had a big shock" I turned towards my study, adding heavily :

"You'd better break the news to them, Joyce."

Which got me out of it nicely, I thought, and I blessed the presence of my ward who knew so well how to handle the Gells.

I could not resist the temptation to listen a moment by my half-open door.

"Something terrible has happened, Mrs. Gell," Joyce said in a hushed voice. "Mr. Foster's cousin, Cyril Loder, has been found . . . dead."

There was a dramatic pause. Then . . .

"Is Foul Play Suspected?" Mrs. Gell asked avidly.

"Come into the kitchen, both of you, and I will tell

as one might say, either from experience or simply from the very sound of it, " Ah, that's the man ! "

I knew Cyril had many friends and acquaintances of the type who, to borrow Mrs. Gell's pungent parlance, I wouldn't trust further than I could spit. The problem the diary would present, if any, would be which of them was the most likely suspect. My main hope was that Cyril had had an appointment with one of the more shady of his acquaintances on the day, or perhaps the very hour, of the murder.

I opened the small volume with the solemn feeling that I was about to expose a criminal. The solemnity of the feeling was a little dashed when I found there were no entries at all for at least three weeks before, even though before then the diary was pretty closely packed with small writing, and much figuring.

Then things began to go wrong in the way they have whenever I interfere with what does not really concern me. I found out :

(a) The diary was not Cyril's.

(b) *So far as I could judge the names and engagements mentioned therein had no connection with Cyril or Harriet.*

This latter fact I could check up to a considerable extent as I was well acquainted with most of their social engagements. I referred to my own diary and checked up on some functions we had jointly attended. They did not coincide more than three times with any mentioned in the mystery diary.

With my self-confidence completely shaken, I realised only too well that the diary conveyed absolutely nothing to me and yet might be invaluable to the police. They had ways of tracing owners of such nameless property which were denied to me. The mere fact that Cyril possessed a diary which was obviously not

his might be a clue to the identity of the murderer of the first magnitude. Of course, he might simply have picked it up, but I doubted this. Cyril was the type of man who would toss a thing away if he did not know to whom it belonged and even if he did he would not take any trouble unless it was going to be worth his while.

I placed the diary on the smoking cabinet at my side, and sighed. The best thing would be to give it to Sergeant Wrigley and tell him everything. Well, perhaps not everything. It would be very awkward to tell him about the gun, for instance, since I no longer had it, and the whole story, if I told him everything, might sound fishy to say the least of it.

While I was in this state of discomfiture and indecision, Joyce entered my room. No one, to judge from her face, would have dreamed that there was anything so serious afoot as a murder. Her blue eyes were dancing and her cheeks were flushed as though she were bursting to confide á huge joke in me.

"Poor Cyril!" she sighed, taking the chair facing me across the hearth.

"Yes, indeed!" I agreed, knowing well enough that what was going on behind those laughing eyes was anything but commiserating.

"What I meant," she said twinkling at me, "was simply that he's no longer a name. He's simply the 'deceased.'"

I must admit that my own expression relaxed at this. I could well imagine Mrs. Gell's large, pale, and solemn face as the sonorous word rolled from her lips. From now on and for several weeks I knew we should have to suffer newspaper parlance as befitting the fact that we were involved somehow in a murder mystery. It had begun with Mrs. Gell's intuitive: "Is foul play suspected?" and heaven alone knew how long it would continue.

"You know," Joyce chuckled, settling herself opposite me, obviously determined to cheer me up. "Mrs. Gell brings back very vivid childhood memories to me. You know that paper she takes—rather sensational, isn't it? Well, I used to wallow in it secretly when I was small. It fascinated me and it was all to do with this word 'deceased.' I was very young at the time, and though I could read well I wasn't always particular about the exact meaning of words. I thought 'deceased' was the same as 'diseased' and as that particular paper always devotes columns to 'the deceased' I used to get some ghoulish pictures in my mind. I can remember reading about how the deceased had been found on the railway line with his head off, or something. Naturally I got a picture of a man riddled with disease. The mere fact that they referred to him as "the deceased" instead of by a name proved he must have been riddled. Picturing this poor, hopeless man, a mass of sores, I could well understand why he decided to end it all on the railway line."

I had to laugh. Joyce has such a lively way of talking and the pictures she conjured up were funny, if gruesome. I wondered how she had kept a straight face while listening to Mrs. Gell.

"As Mrs. Gell points out, Guardy, it is going to be very awkward for The Deceased's Widow. She added significantly that it was well known that they were Estranged and that the marriage had Not Been a Happy One."

Joyce must then have remembered something for she coloured suddenly and then asked more soberly :

"I don't think it will be awkward for Aunt Harriet, Guardy, do you? One has only to know her. She isn't at all the sort of person to do that sort of thing. I mean, one could imagine her acting in cold disdain as though the person who injured her were a slug, but

turning violent. No ! Not under any circumstance ! ”

Joyce was reassuringly emphatic. I hoped the police would get the same impression. I'd always had a feeling that Joyce did not like Harriet very much, but then Joyce is a very loyal soul, she did at the time resent the fact that Harriet had preferred Cyril to me, and I suppose young impressions stick.

“ No ! Harriet did not murder Cyril,” I said quietly.

“ But as a malign fate would have it, she and I appear to have been the only known people in the house about the time of Cyril's death.”

“ How do you know what time he died ? ” Joyce protested. “ He might have been dead ages.”

“ On the contrary,” I said wearily, “ he had had a very violent quarrel with Harriet only half an hour previously. Ellen, unfortunately, overheard it—she couldn't help it as Cyril was in one of his roaring bull moods—and retailed it to the police as justification for what she thought her mistress had done.”

Joyce's pretty flushed face paled. It relieved me somewhat to confide in Joyce and I told her as much as I could without mentioning how, in my blundering efforts to save Harriet, I was helping to tie the rope tighter round her neck.

“ It does sound serious,” she admitted after listening to everything I had to tell her. “ But there is one thing to cling on to. The real murderer is somewhere and the police are pretty cute these days. By the way, Guardy,” she shot at me suddenly, “ what made you call there to-night of all nights ? You're such a creature of habit, you know, and you hadn't told Mrs. Gell you'd be later on that account, so I presume it wasn't an arrangement.”

“ I went in quite by chance,” I replied, hoping that I had not hesitated in my reply. “ The door was swinging open and there was an air of desertion about

the place. I thought if I called then, I could satisfy my mind and at the same time fulfil a slight duty I have of paying my respects occasionally."

Joyce's blue eyes regarded me thoughtfully. I found I had to avoid her gaze. She's a very discerning young woman and seems to know me inside out.

"I believe I heard once that some of Cyril's money would revert to you in the event of his death," she said abruptly. "You worry about Harriet, Guardy, but don't you see you might easily be on the spot, too?"

"That thought hasn't entirely escaped me," I replied a little drily. "We have to hope that the police catch the real criminal before a lot of dirty linen is washed in public."

"It's queer that you didn't catch a glimpse of anybody, or hear the shot as you approached the house, or saw anything unusual to give some clue. In fact, there seems to be a lot of queer things about it all. If I didn't know you so well, Guardy, dear, I'd be convinced you'd done it. I know how I felt towards Cyril: I couldn't bear the sight of him. You must have felt like wringing his neck for him heaps of times." She studied me thoughtfully and added: "If he had had his neck wrung, I should have known it was you, but a shot in the back is something stealthy and horrible."

I did not say anything. My pipe had gone out and I had not the heart to get another going.

"Then there's Judy," Joyce mused, frowning in an effort to piece it all together. "That's queer, too. Then that man who was lurking about quite near to the Lodgers' house, he seemed to know something. Did you know him, Guardy?"

"He . . . he is someone I'm trying to help," I said uneasily, but to my surprise this reply seemed to satisfy Joyce entirely. Probably she had grown resigned, like the Gells, to people I was always trying

to help. They had suffered from some of them in the past, for not all had come up to expectations.

"As a matter of fact," I went on in order to focus the limelight on safe ground, "he is going to do a few odd jobs for me round the house until he can get fixed up. That reminds me, I must speak to Gell about him. He will only be temporary help."

"Well, you know how awkward Gell is over these casuals," Joyce said more cheerfully, "even though he was once helped from the dregs by you. Still, he has repaid your trust ; he gets a bit mad about the defaulters, and there have been a good proportion, darling ! If you want a good tip, throw them some sort of a bone about the Crime. It will put them in better spirits for bearing the news that they've to take on another casual."

I was grateful for the advice. I did not wish to get on the wrong side of the Gells if I could help it. Atmospheres are uncomfortable things.

I went to the kitchen instead of ringing. Joyce said she would come along to say "good-night." We were on matey terms with them in some ways, they liked it.

They both greeted me with sad and respectful solemnity. I think I had assumed more importance in their eyes than one of my inoffensive way of going on usually possesses.

"There's no more news of Judy, I'm afraid," I said, shamelessly taking my cue from Joyce. "I can't help thinking," I added weightily, "that she is somehow involved in this tragedy. Perhaps she saw something. Perhaps she might have recognised the murderer . . . I don't know. But it seems more than strange the two things coinciding. You know what a perfect little dog Judy always was . . ."

I left the rest in the air, simply shaking my head

sadly and leaving the Gells to make what use of this new line they could.

They were bursting to talk over the whole thing, and I mentally gave them credit for showing Better Feelings as Mrs. Gell would have put it.

"Oh, and by the way," I continued turning to more slippery ground. "I've got a man coming to-morrow, Gell. He'll be a kind of handyman for a short while."

I felt Joyce prod me in the ribs. Something more was expected.

"As a matter of fact, this is in the strictest confidence," I said lowering my voice, "but I think he Knows Something and I particularly don't want to lose sight of him. You will probably assist the ends of justice both of you if you make him welcome and encourage him to stay. Truth Will Out, you know!" I ended feebly, highly relieved to see the remarkable change of expression on both their faces when they realised that this wasn't an ordinary casual.

"Good-night, both of you!" Joyce cut in at the right moment. "It's to be hoped we can all sleep to-night."

"After what has Transpired!" Mrs. Gell said solemnly, "it'll be many a night before I can hope for proper sleep. When there's a murder there's usually another, and Who'll be the Next? You'll have to lock up careful, Gell, this night."

Which reminded me that I ought to return to my study and secure my window which was rather easy of access from the outside. After the incident of Judy and the revolver, I knew things weren't as simple as they seemed. All this took place in the days not long before the outbreak of war when we still could have our lights burning and our windows uncovered. I seldom drew my curtains, liking to get a breath of fresh air without sitting in the draught.

I crossed to the window. I thought it seemed open wider than when I had last touched it, but I thought little of it as I closed it and fastened the catch.

But as I glanced round the room I was conscious of something different, something not quite as I had left it. I have a tidy mind which usually registers things quite accurately and as my eyes rested on the smoking cabinet my heart seemed suddenly to jump into my throat and stay there.

The diary had gone !

I crossed swiftly to the window, opened it and looked out. The moon shed a decent light in the more distant part of the garden, which at this side of the house was mainly lawn, and the light from my room reflected strongly on the rough gravel beneath the window.

Everything was still and peaceful. There was no sight nor sound of anything. It all suddenly seemed eerie as though I had the house peopled with invisible folk who could act without being seen.

It occurred to me in that instant that perhaps Cyril's murderer had been lurking about the house all the time. He must have seen me pick up the gun ; he must even have seen me withdraw the diary. He must have known what it was. It must have been of tremendous value to him. Perhaps he had killed for it, and yet I, like a fool, had tossed it to one side thinking it of no importance.

I sat down in my chair and could have groaned. I felt a helpless, blundering impotent fool. How smugly I had appropriated real evidence in the conviction that I could shield Harriet and lay my finger on the real murderer. What was wrong with me was that I had read too much detective fiction of the type wherein the amateur is always leagues ahead of the professional. But it was one thing to read a nicely set out murder

solution, and quite another to set one out oneself. Where did one start? Worse, how did one proceed when the ground was cut from under one's feet at every step taken?

I ought to let the police know. Sergeant Wrigley was a decent sort of fellow, I thought dejectedly. He knew me and a lot of my foibles. I ought not to withhold what I knew, serious though my actions had been in hiding evidence. Wrigley might be willing to hide my share while acting on what I could tell him. I'd confess about my feelings for Harriet and my fear that she might be suspected of the crime.

Before I could change my mind I dialled the number of Wrigley's station and asked to speak to him.

Then another blow fell.

"This is Constable Pratt speaking," the voice at the other end said. "Sergeant Wrigley asked me to let you know if there were any developments when you rang up, but there's nothing so far, not even about the dog. He's been called away urgently. His father has died suddenly, so Inspector Caldwell is completely in charge of the case now . . ."

I believe I thanked him before I rang off. I could not lay bare my soul before Inspector Caldwell. I knew him fairly well, but he has a kind of cold efficiency which would not lend a sympathetic ear to the tale of muddle such as I had to unfold. I could have faced him if I still possessed the gun and the diary, but having been robbed so easily of both, my spirit quailed.

Not only this, but I was daunted by a worse thought. Supposing I did tell the whole story. Would they believe me, or would they simply think I was telling an involved tale simply to confuse the issue. I'd probably only succeed in making matters infinitely worse.

It was late, but on an impulse I rang up Harriet.

"Harriet," I said urgently. "You used to have a revolver years ago, have you still got it?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied calmly and confidently in a voice which at once soothed my jangled nerves. "I packed it with my other things before coming away. It's in one of the cases. They haven't all been unpacked yet."

"Then, will you see if it is there all right?" I urged. "The police may want to know, and if you can produce your own and it is different . . . you know what I mean."

"Why, certainly," she replied at once. "Just hold the line a minute, Henry."

It was more than a minute; in fact I had the receiver to my ear for such a long time that I began to grow alarmed. But at long last Harriet's voice spoke to me again. This time it was completely changed.

"I can't find it, Henry!" she announced in a low, troubled voice. "It is not in the flat at all. Somebody must have taken it after it had been packed."

"That's bad, Harriet!" I said, trying to keep gloom and despair from sounding in my voice.

"Yes," she replied wearily. "I suppose I'd better let the police know. It will be better than waiting until they find it . . . and perhaps find it has been used." Her voice trembled a little on the last words. She knew things were difficult, to say the least of it. If it had indeed been her revolver which had fired the shot . . .

"Yes, Harriet!" I said encouragingly. "It is much better to let the police know everything . . ."

After a few more words, I rang off, wondering why I didn't practise what I preached. Whatever the real feelings of Cyril's murderer might be that night, I knew he couldn't feel more guilty than I did. Possibly the crime troubled him far less than my subsequent

actions troubled me. My conscience has always been rather a tender growth and apt to trouble me inordinately at the slightest provocation.

Perhaps I ought to have told Harriet to keep quiet about her revolver. I couldn't quite make up my mind what I really ought to have done, but the mere fact that somebody else had been so anxious to get hold of it made me realise that its evidence could not have been so damning to Harriet as I had at first supposed.

I could draw only one crumb of comfort from the mix-up. Even if I had touched neither the revolver nor the diary, the murderer might somehow have removed them before the arrival of the police. Whoever he was, he must have been hiding somewhere close at hand for him to have seem me send Judy off with the gun and to know that I possessed that diary.

No doubt the repentant thief—I had not yet got into the habit of thinking of him by his real name—had called at a very inopportune time for the murderer and my visit had followed so closely after that he had probably remained in his hiding place. A lot had apparently happened in a short time at "The Cedars." I'd certainly not been idle myself whilst I had been there, and now where had I landed myself? I was an Accessory After The Fact, as Mrs. Gell would have been only too ready to point out, being well up in these things.

I had to smile a trifle wryly when I remembered that I had looked upon myself during the bigger part of the past ten years as a man whom life had robbed of something very dear to him and to whom life could never be happy and worth the living. What an idiotic fool I had been! Looking back on the past years, even taking into account the genuine grief I had felt over the loss of Harriet and the subsequent unhappiness at knowing she had discovered too late what type of man Cyril really was, I could envy myself. Life had gone along

Aye, that was the rub. I could think of many a hero or detective fiction who would have known without hesitation not only what to do next but how to turn the unfortunate happenings to their own credit and the speedy downfall of the wily ones. It all looks so simple in writing. I had repeatedly had the sneaking feeling that I could do as well, for I had often very proudly anticipated the developments and guessed what would happen next. But faced as I now was

with a problem, which might perhaps seem simple were I reading of it, I was absolutely and completely stuck and had not an idea in my head save that of wishing fervently that I had had a bad cold that evening and had not taken Judy for her usual run.

But there was at least one thing I could do, I thought, brightening a little at the prospect of any sort of action. I could write down several of the dates and entries which had been in the diary. I have a tidy mind and an excellent memory for detail and I knew I could set down quite a few of the entries which I had studied so carefully.

I proceeded to do this at once. I even got a diary which had lain untouched in my drawer—a duplicate Christmas present—and made the entries against their appropriate dates. I knew I could check up on some of these from my own diary, but I relied completely on my memory until I had entered every item I could possibly recollect accurately. When I checked off the one or two which coincided with some entries in my own diary and found I had got them right, I felt confident about the remainder.

This little bit of action led to another idea. If I found out, partly with the aid of memory and partly by enquiry of the hostesses of those functions which I had not personally attended, the names of the people who had attended them and by elimination discovered which person or persons had been present at each of them, then I would no doubt lead myself to the owner of the diary.

I had not the slightest idea how this was going to help the case even if I did achieve it, but no criminal was more desperate to cover his tracks than I was to do some little thing which might counter-balance the ill I had done in the eyes of the law when I was eventually forced by circumstances to tell the whole truth.

I heard Gell going his rounds and locking all doors and windows with more than even his usual care, and I decided that I, too, would retire to "sleep on it." I did not fear any more intrusions that night. Cyril's murderer had already obtained from me quite easily all that he needed to cover his tracks.

I made up my mind to 'phone through to the office in the morning and tell them I would not be coming for a few days under the circumstances. Charlie Weekes would turn up first thing in the morning and I determined to bide my time and see whether a close questioning of him would produce anything tangible or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

I AWOKE reluctantly the next morning, knowing as I did that I had decisions to make and problems to solve which were beyond me. Joyce was down even before me and she was immersed in a paper of the type subscribed to by the Gells. My *Times* lay in its neat folds and I opened it finding, as I expected, just the bare details of the crime.

"It makes one wonder where they get all their information from," Joyce remarked, studying my *morning-after-the-tragedy* expression with interest. "Do you want to read this? The Gells certainly know how to pick their sensations. It has already been named 'The Parting of the Ways' Murder."

"'The Parting of the Ways' Murder?" I queried in surprise. "Whatever for."

"Because it happened just at the time when everything was fixed for the Loders to part for good and all," Joyce explained patiently. "They seem to be flogging that side of it."

"I do hope they don't get hold of Ellen," I commented anxiously. "I'm afraid people are going to jump to conclusions as it is. It seems so obvious that it might be Harriet—or me."

"If I intended to commit a murder," Joyce said thoughtfully, "I'd wait until I knew there was somebody else near the spot who everybody knew had no love for the murdered man. After all, what if the wrong person was hanged, so long as it wasn't me? Having committed one murder another crime on my conscience would be a mere nothing. One's conscience becomes hardened with each blow. That's why yours

is so sensitive, poor Guardy! You've never let your deeds stun it into apathy and disuse. I should say you look more like the real murderer at this moment than the real murderer ever will."

I tried to pull myself together and appear more my natural self—whatever that was. When one is natural one is quite unconscious of it.

"Is there any news of Judy?" I asked, meaning to let Joyce think that this was the main cause of my gloom.

"Not a word!" she replied, now much more serious herself because she was very fond of the little dog. I had bought it in the first place for her, not knowing at the time how to amuse young ladies verging on their teens.

"I rang the police station first thing," she added. "It's odd, isn't it? I mean, Judy's name and address were plain enough on her collar. Nobody could have an excuse for not bringing her back, and yet if she were a casualty, surely the police would know?"

"If the police didn't, you'd think those reporters would," I said bitterly. "What they don't know they imagine, which is all the same to them."

Mrs. Gell entered at that moment carrying a laden tray. I bade her a subdued "Good morning" and looked at her sorrowfully. I considered sorrowful silence would be the easier path. I could see she was bursting with suppressed lugubriety—to borrow one of her own words. But she could burst afterwards with Joyce, I decided. I was in no state to be anything more than One of the Chief Mourners.

"And no news even about Judy," I said, shaking my head sadly as though we had by invisible means discussed the main sensation. "It is one thing on top of another. Has Charlie Weekes turned up yet?"

"'E has not," she replied ponderously, arranging the

dishes on the table. "I expect," she added darkly, "that 'e's one of them specimens as turn up when they think the work's done."

I tried to avoid the twinkle in Joyce's eye. There had, alas, been one or two of "them specimens."

"Let me know when he does come, Mrs. Gell, won't you?" I asked. "As I told you last night, I have Particular Reasons."

She softened under the reminder. She knew well enough that she would have to Observe the Decencies and respect me for wanting to bear the Grief and Shock silently—at least for a time.

"I'll have elevenses with you, Mrs. Gell, if I may," Joyce spoke up in the way she had of getting Mrs. Gell just where she wanted her. "Maybe we'll have Found Out Something by then."

There was a kind of satisfied flick to Mrs. Gell's usual waddle as she retired. She knew she could rely on Joyce. Joyce, not being a blood relation, could be Pumped.

"Your visit is very opportune, Joyce," I commented gratefully, and we both laughed, for the word "opportune" is Mrs. Gell's favourite one after funerals. I felt better after the laugh; it seemed to freshen me up and I even tackled some breakfast. It was indeed a blessing that Joyce was there. Although at times she seems flippant and inclined to make fun of things, I know by experience that she is extremely reliable.

Just as we were nearing the end of breakfast—I think Joyce had saved her little surprise until she had satisfied herself that I had eaten enough, she asked with studied carelessness:

"Guardy, can you remember off-hand the number of Hugh Paisley's car?"

She looked at me and I looked at her. I sat up suddenly very straight. Hugh Paisley's name figured in

the list I had whittled down to seven, and, as I remarked before, I have a good memory for numbers, names, or details like that, but I am not quick on the uptake. Consequently, when the repentant thief had said he thought the car's number had begun with the letter " L " and ended with the figure " 2," and had confessed to having bad sight, this had registered less than nothing in my slow mind. I had thought it worth nothing, but now that Joyce asked me for the number of Hugh Paisley's car, I not only could quote it exactly, but it began with " L " and ended with " 2."

" And it's a big black saloon car," Joyce said, trying to appear casual, as though she had not been pretty smart. " It fits in with what your hoarse-voiced friend described. But if it had been Hugh Paisley, he'd be the first to come and own up. I mean, he's so friendly towards you and Aunt Harriet."

" Of course, you know," I hesitated, " Charlie Weekes wasn't at all sure about the number. He admitted to being short-sighted at the best of times."

" All that we've got to do," Joyce pointed out, " is to get in touch with Hugh and tell him his car was seen to run down Judy. If he wasn't driving it, he'll know who was. There's no shadow of reason, is there ? for him to keep dark about hurting Judy. He'd realise we'd sooner know what had happened to her no matter how bad it was."

If Joyce knew of no reason, at least I could think of one. If Hugh had picked up the dog and seen what she had been carrying and then had heard of the murder, he might be as anxious as I to hush matters up. I knew he couldn't bear the sight of Cyril and yet had the greatest esteem for Harriet . . .

This reflection opened up all kinds of new thoughts. Could the diary have belonged to Hugh ? Hugh's dislike of Cyril was nothing in itself since most men

outside his own type disliked him, but coupled with the fact that Hugh was one of the seven significant names, it might mean something.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Guardy?" Joyce's voice broke in a little impatiently on my thoughts. "I can't help but notice that if I even make the slightest mention of anything concerning last night's happenings, you go off into a kind of petrified day-dream."

"I was just doing a bit of mental jig-saw," I explained feebly. "So many queer things seem to be happening all at once . . ."

I was interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Gell. I could not help the thought passing through my mind that at last the woman was really happy in my service. I have often regretfully been of the opinion that I robbed Mrs. Gell of the spice of life. Blameless though her own life is, I cannot help feeling that she would have been really satisfied in my service if there had been occasional "Goings-On."

"Inspector Caldwell to see you," she announced proudly. She could not have welcomed the King with more of a glow, probably it would have been considerably less. Majesty cannot compete with Mortuary in the dark channels of Mrs. Gell's mind.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gell," I said. "Will you show him into my study? I'll join him in a minute." I made a show of finishing off my coffee, which had long since been finished.

"Oh, by the way," I called after her. "Has Charlie Weekes shown up yet?"

The answer was in the negative and I looked helplessly at Joyce.

"It doesn't look as if we can place too much reliance on that skeleton of a number he gave, does it?" she said sympathetically, "or even about the car's running

Judy down at all. He was perhaps using his wits to curry favour."

"I won't say anything about him to the Inspector," I nodded. "It's no good-quoting what one can't prove. Inspector Caldwell is a man of cold, hard fact."

I was conscious of a sneaking kind of relief. Without Charlie Weekes to back me up on certain points, it would be madness to embark on my story.

It was fortunate that my memory was so good. I remembered word for word the story I had told to Sergeant Wrigley and even the cold, grey eyes of Inspector Caldwell seemed satisfied when he found I was not to be tripped up on any point. The Inspector was *getting on* in years. I understood he was due to retire at any time now. From my point of view it was a pity he hadn't retired earlier, then perhaps Sergeant Wrigley would have been in his shoes. Had this been the case, I am sure I should have told the whole truth, for there was something nice and friendly about Wrigley which invited confidences. It may be that Caldwell had a softer heart. Men's appearances often belie their real natures, but one simply cannot tell a tale of foolish error and bungling to a cold hard eye. One can to a warm, friendly one, even if a heart of stone is behind it. It is the eye one sees.

I tried to question the Inspector when I thought he had finished with me, but I got nothing out of him beyond the fact that no arrest had yet been made, and I did no more than lead him to the subject of my friendship with the Loders—particularly with Harriet—a subject I would have preferred to avoid.

"Neither you nor Mrs. Loder heard any shot!" he mused. "That seems odd since she was in the house and you must have been approaching it round about the time he was shot."

"Mrs. Loder was right away at the top of the house,"

I pointed out. "I had some difficulty in attracting her attention with the front door bell. No doubt a distant report would not register particularly on her mind. There are so many cars around here. Even if she did hear anything she would doubtless subconsciously think it was a car back-firing."

"You yourself heard no sound which might or might not have been a car?" he asked, looking straight at me.

Thank goodness I could answer quite truthfully that I had not. So far as I could judge the Inspector had, at the moment, no intention of arresting either Harriet or me. Perhaps he was waiting until after the inquest which, he informed me as he rose to go, was fixed for two o'clock on the morrow.

The thought of the inquest was a fresh source of worry, even after the Inspector had gone. Charlie Weekes—if that was his name—was, by rights, the principal witness. Common sense said that he ought to be called to give his testimony and all sentiment should be brushed ruthlessly aside. I must admit I was feeling very disappointed in my repentant thief. His voice had seemed to me to have a genuine, if somewhat hoarse, ring of truth in it. But then, my uneasy conscience argued, hadn't the voices of others had a genuine ring of truth in them, too, only to prove . . .

I switched off my mental argument at this point as I had done so often before by thinking of the man who had been found drowned so near the spot where I had refused to help another with a desperate ring in his voice.

I had promised Charlie Weekes. I would wait and see what he had to say when I next contacted him. If he did not come to my house I should have to find him out. The search for him would give me something to occupy my mind, and if at the end of it I found he really had been dodging me and had had no intention

of fulfilling his promise, then I would see that he came forward with his bit of evidence.

Joyce came in at that moment, eager to know what had transpired and I was forced to arouse myself from my "petrified day-dream." I gave her a concise account of what had passed between us, telling her that she could pass on the information to Mrs. Gell that the inquest was to be held at two o'clock on the morrow and that it would be quite in order for her and Gell to attend it if they wanted.

If they wanted! Joyce and I exchanged a kind of secret twinkle. Brute violence alone would keep Mrs. Gell from that inquest.

It was at this point that Charlie Weekes rang my front-door bell. I felt quite a glow of pleasure when I saw him coming up the short drive, but I could see from where I stood that he looked as if he had been through a bad emotional crisis. The fact that he made straight for the front door seemed to tell me that he wanted to speak to me first and urgently, so I hustled Joyce off to give the Gells the latest titbits and I myself let in a very harassed and even more hoarse Charlie Weekes.

"I 'ope you didn't think as 'ow I was letting you down, Guv'nor," he said, as I led the way to my study. "I've been in a kind of nightmare since I left you. I 'adn't oughter 'ave stayed out as long as I did yesterday, not with Meg like she was . . ."

I gave him a drink of beer hoping to clear some of the hoarseness from his throat and to steady him up a little. I dared not offer him anything stronger. He seemed overwrought enough as it was.

"Meg was bad when I got back last night," he explained, only too anxious to get his explanation off his chest. "She'd bin bad for hours and 'adn't liked to knock one of the neighbours, seeing as 'ow . . ."

He gave a queer kind of shrug, and let his hands fall between his knees in an attitude of complete self-abnegation. I rather gathered that since he had been in prison the neighbours had not had anything to do with either him or Meg.

"Well, I didn't like to leave 'er alone and yet I knew we oughter 'ave the nurse, so I swallows me pride and arsk the woman next door if I could send 'er kid with a note to the nurse. People's funny. One minute they won't look at you, and the next they'll do anything. Mrs. Grigg was fair orlright. There was nothing she couldn't do when she knew poor Meg 'ad been alone all that while. She didn't think much ter me, but then I don't mind. It's all been my fault. Meg's too good for the likes of me and I shan't mind so long as the neighbours speak to 'er agin."

I had to let him tell his story in his own rambling way. There was something about him I liked even though he had a kind of furtive, hunted look and didn't seem able to sit in the same position for two minutes at a time. I gathered, as the story laboriously proceeded, that several sorts of complications had set in. Poor Meg seemed to have had a lonely and miserable time of it with the neighbours shunning them and she seemed to have neglected herself a bit. Anyway, in the end she had to be rushed off to hospital. The child was still-born and Meg's life despaired of. Even now, Charlie assured me, obviously almost at the end of his tether, it was a case of touch and go, but Meg apparently had been "that pleased" when he had managed to convey to her weary consciousness that he had got a job that she had "bucked up no end."

Well, it was obvious that Charlie had had his dishful of trouble and plenty to spare. I felt downright sorry for him and his wife and determined to help them to get on their feet. Charlie was obviously the sort which

is full of good intentions that don't always come off—rather a weakness of mine at times, and I suppose a fellow feeling drew me to him.

"And I was thinking, Guv'nor," he plucked up courage to say at last in hoarse desperation, "whether you could keep my name out . . . you know what I mean. It's in all the papers. Fair added to the nightmare, it did, when I seed it this morning. 'That'd finish Meg,' I told myself, 'if she saw my name there.' And it's the neighbours as well, Guv'nor. They've bin that decent over Meg. Can't do too much for 'er now that they know she sort of let 'erself in for all this because she daren't ask anybody for 'elp. I've told 'em I've got a job, but if it comes out that I was mixed up in a murder through trying to 'elp meself, well . . ."

Again he finished with that queer ape-like gesture with his hands hanging low between his knees and the expression on his face that of all worms he was the most worthless.

This being friendly with the neighbours again seemed to be everything to him and his Meg. I should have been stony-hearted had I refused such a humane request. Being up to the ears in intrigue myself, I did not see what difference it could make to let at least one person have a rest from anxiety.

"Don't worry, Charlie," I reassured him. "I think everything is going to be all right. You won't feel like doing much while Mrs. Weekes is so bad . . ."

But here he cut me short.

"I can only go to the 'orspital certain times, Guv'nor, and if I 'ad plenty to do in between like it'd sort of take my mind off it. And Meg'll want to know what I've been doing," he added proudly, almost a light in his abject eyes. "You know wot it means, Guv'nor, for a woman to 'ave 'er 'usband in work and to be

friendly with the neighbours. After wot she's bin through, it'll 'elp to take 'er mind off the kid."

"Very well," I nodded. "Oh, and by the way . . ."

Here I must confess to encouraging Charlie in more than a little artfulness. I mentioned that it was better for him to stand well in with the Gells, and said that I had hinted that he knew something about the murder.

"You can tell them about the black car and Judy," I suggested. "You need not be afraid of anything going any further. Whatever you tell them, swear them to secrecy and say that it must be kept to themselves as the police are Laying a Trap. I don't mind at all if they get the idea that you are helping me to track various people down . . ."

Charlie was quick. He nodded gratefully at me. He knew the Gells of this world.

"And if I could only 'elp, Guv'nor," he pleaded hoarsely. "I'd do anything, straight I would. I feel kind of guilty. I'd like to see the 'ole thing settled. It's got me on the jumps."

"Perhaps when a bit of your own personal worry has subsided a little," I replied encouragingly, "you may think of something which will be helpful. Try to recollect every tiny incident which happened, or any person or car you saw that night. Things may come back in time. Don't worry over it, but if anything occurs to you, let me know. Now, I'll take you along and introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Gell. They'll be glad of some help, particularly with the outhouses and garden."

We settled a few details of meals and wages to Charlie's entire satisfaction, and I was pleased to note that he had a satisfactory reception in the kitchen.

Joyce waylaid me in the lobby.

"What now?" she asked eagerly. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright and sparkling with eager

anticipation. She, too, must have read plenty of detective fiction and obviously wanted to try her hand at sleuthing.

I smiled encouragingly at her.

"I thought I would follow up your clue and visit Hugh Paisley. If it was his car, we might at least clear up the mystery of Judy's disappearance."

"I think it is all linked up with the murder," she said very definitely, "so I'd better come along, too. You're good in some ways, Guardy," she said kindly, "but you're not as quick as you might be and you're too trusting. It will be nice if we can clear the whole thing up before the inquest to-morrow. It will save a lot of unpleasantness for Aunt Harriet—and you."

I knew it would be no good arguing with her, though I would have preferred to go alone. But Joyce had the superb confidence of youth, plus a zest for adventure. It does all seem easy in detective fiction, one ought to know how to start and what to look for. But, candidly, I had had enough. Let those who want thrills have them. I yearned for the whole thing to be nice and tidily in the hands of the police with myself back in the halcyon days when I was drab John Citizen with no sinister "accessory after the fact" warning ringing constantly in my ears. I am essentially the type of man who can plan and act to advantage only when his conscience is perfectly clear. I wished I had thought of this when I had meddled so rashly in the crime.

"I wish," Joyce's voice cut in plaintively on my thoughts as we stepped out of the house and turned in the direction of Hugh Paisley's service flat. "I do wish I knew what was going on in your mind, Guardy. I'm sure you're hiding things from me. If you feel you can't tell me, at least don't look so much like a taxpayer, and don't jump guiltily as soon as another person's

voice breaks into the troubled channels of your mental musings."

"I must confess to feeling considerably worried, Joyce," I replied somewhat stiffly. "To have one's cousin murdered and to be a possible suspect, even leaving the worry of Judy out of it altogether, should give any rational person enough food for serious thought."

But Joyce, who should have been completely squashed and repentant, returned at once to the attack.

"I know! And that's what's bothering me," she retorted surprisingly. "You haven't got the sort of expression you ought to have. I could understand your looking sort of quietly concerned, but I cannot get over this expression of GUILT. Yes, Guardy," she finished accusingly "Real Guilt—that is, when you go off into one of those petrified day-dreams. If I didn't know you so well I'd begin to have the ghastliest suspicions."

"Perhaps they are justified," I teased her. It was the only thing I could think of in reply. "But it's my experience of life that an expression of bland innocence is cultivated by the real villain."

"Still, you've got some guilty secret, Guardy," Joyce accused. "And I'll worm it out of you somehow. You're the sort of person who needs saving from yourself. If you told me everything I'm sure I could be of real help. I did spot the clue to Hugh's car," she ended slightly reproachfully.

"If it was Hugh's car," I temporised. "After all, Charlie Weekes confesses to very poor sight. We'd better wait and see what Hugh has to say."

It never occurred to me that Hugh would be out, even though it was a week-day and I knew him for a busy and successful stockbroker. I must have subconsciously thought that all the world—at least the local

part of it—would be standing still waiting to solve this crime which affected Harriet so closely. But Hugh was a close friend of hers ; it seemed callous to me that he should put business first.

“ I suppose I could contact him at his office ? ” I asked the porter, who knew me well by sight.

“ I don’t think so, sir,” he replied. “ He gave me this telephone number to contact him if anything important came through from the City. If it is urgent, you might try him there.”

I thanked him politely as I took the number. It conveyed nothing to Joyce, but I had rung up that very number the previous night. It was the ‘phone number of Harriet’s new flat.

“ Are you going to ‘phone ? ” Joyce asked as we turned away.

“ No, I’m going to call. This is Harriet’s new ‘phone number. I wish I had gone there first.”

Indeed I felt quite angry with myself for not going there first. Hugh is one of those big, strong, silent men to whom it is natural to turn in an emergency. I hated to think that Harriet would perhaps be more than glad of his presence. I was surprised to find that I had put calling on Hugh before the necessity of calling on Harriet. I had not even spoken to her on the ‘phone. As so often happens in this life I had been so busy wondering what I could do to help her that I had not even done the simplest and most obvious thing.

Joyce gave me a quick, sidelong glance as though she could tell what was going on in my mind.

“ I ought to have ‘phoned Aunt Harriet and let her know I was here last night,” she commented, as if determined to soothe away the embarrassment which her keen eyes detected. “ But all this mystery and excitement seems to change one’s ordinary way of going on, doesn’t it ? Thank goodness,” she added

fervently, "that I didn't take up that teaching appointment. I had a feeling in my bones that I'd regret it!"

I hailed a passing taxi. I did not want to waste another minute in getting to Harriet's flat. In the interval of getting there I found myself musing on the fact that Harriet was the type of woman who seemed, without the slightest effort on her part, to attract men. I knew several women, perhaps equally as good-looking and charming as Harriet whom men seemed to pass completely by. It is hard to explain such things. It would have suited me better if Harriet had no one but me to turn to, no one but me who realised fully how she was placed and who could be her sole prop in her difficult hour. But then, as the taxi drew up outside her block of flats, I had to admit in all honesty that perhaps it was a good thing for Harriet's peace of mind that she had others to turn to besides myself. In a very short space of time I'd succeeded to an amazing extent in making the whole delicate situation more difficult for her.

"That looks like a plain-clothes man," Joyce whispered out of the corner of her mouth as we alighted. "Do you think you could manage to look less furtive?"

I resented strongly the use of that particular adjective. Furtive! I paid off the driver and made a mental note to take Joyce to task once we returned home. I felt really angry with her as the word conjured up such objectionable things.

I seethed my way into the hall, and then I caught Joyce's clearly twinkling eyes.

"A much better expression," she said encouragingly. "Do try to keep it up, Guardy."

I tried to think of some cutting rejoinder, but as usual my mind did not respond. In half-an-hour's time, or more, I knew, from long experience, it would

occur to me what exactly I ought to have said to Joyce to make her feel sufficiently small and to emerge myself with dignity and honour.

As it was I pressed the bell and soon we were ushered into Harriet's new sitting-room in which Hugh Paisley was already comfortably ensconced having all the advantages of the one who is first on the scene.

Harriet greeted us with her usual quiet warmth, but she looked very pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. It was hard to believe that she was only nine years Joyce's senior.

"Hello, Henry!" Hugh greeted me with that kind of friendliness which always seemed to me to have something patronising in it. "Why, Joyce!" he added with more warmth. "What a young lady of fashion we've grown into!"

For a while, Joyce was the centre of attraction, but it was that very efficient young lady herself who turned the conversation back to where we all wanted it.

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Harriet," she said sincerely, "about all this trouble. It's going to be very nasty for you for a long time. Would it help at all if I stayed with you until everything's settled?"

"That's sweet of you, Joyce," Harriet said gratefully. "But it would involve you in a deal of unpleasant limelight."

"I think Joyce's suggestion is a very good one," I interposed, and as it was obvious that Harriet was only hesitating out of consideration for Joyce, the latter eventually got her way and it was easy to see the many advantages of such an arrangement.

"And I can come round quite often and help you out with the Gells, Guardy," Joyce added kindly. "And you won't mind coming along, too, will you?" she asked, turning to Harriet. "It would give them quite a thrill. After all," she added, in self-justifica-

tion, "they've had a terribly monotonous life with Guardy."

Harriet's lips twitched and Hugh openly smiled. For once I had the right reply ready ; it came from my heart.

"If that's monotony," I said fervently, "then it's all I want."

"I agree, Henry," Harriet nodded. "We are too inclined to criticise our lives and compare them with something better or what might-have-been. It is only when something worse turns up that we realise that our past troubles have been almost comfortable in comparison."

"But this unpleasantness will only be of short duration," Hugh pointed out in his deep, authoritative voice. "They've only got to arrest the criminal."

"Or who they think is the criminal," I cut in, speaking my thoughts aloud.

Harriet caught her breath and looked from Hugh to me with wide, troubled eyes.

"Yes, Hugh," she said. "That's what I'm afraid of. Who is the real criminal? Where is he? There are one or two very obvious suspects from the police point of view."

But Hugh was optimistic.

"Oh, they'll enquire into Cyril's private life and rake up all sorts of possibilities," he said largely.

His airy confidence which irritated me, seemed to console Harriet a little.

"By the way, Hugh," I cut in. "Were you out in your car last night?"

"I came back from business in it at my usual hour," he replied, looking at me rather fixedly.

"Oddly enough, Judy disappeared last night—and you know what a sedate animal she always was. When Joyce and I were searching for her a loafer told us that

he had seen a dark saloon car knock the dog down and stop, and the driver got out and picked her up. Since then we've heard nothing about it and her address was plainly on her collar."

"You're not suggesting that I'd do away with your dog and say nothing about it, are you?" Hugh asked somewhat menacingly.

"I was wondering if you knew for certain where your car was during the whole of last evening," I said patiently. "The man thought the number began with 'L' and ended with '2.'"

Harriet was looking at Hugh now. She had that queer stiff look on her face which she had had when she first wondered whether I had killed Cyril.

Hugh shrugged carelessly.

"I left it outside the block of flats as usual," he said. "If I'm not wanting it again the porter usually runs it round to the garage for me. I don't think he's in the habit of going a little jaunt round in it."

As Hugh seemed a little nettled at my associating Judy's accident with his car, Harriet came into the breach with enquiries about how and when Judy had disappeared.

After listening to as much of the story of Judy's disappearance as I cared to tell, Hugh said impatiently, though more tolerantly:

"As if anybody would be fool enough to stop and pick a dog up they'd run over if they didn't intend to own up to the accident. They'd simply drive on. If you ask me anything, Henry, that loafer simply wanted to tell you some tale to curry favour. Perhaps he made away with the dog himself. I'd have him up at the police station, if I were you. They'd soon worm the truth out of him."

"All the same, Hugh," Harriet said quietly. "Perhaps it would be a good idea to find out whether your

car was used last night or not. It would be rather a dreadful thing if the criminal borrowed a car for the purpose of shooting at Cyril through the open windows of the house."

"He'd have to be a good shot," Joyce said thoughtfully, "so that rules you out, Guardy. But it would be a good idea. Anybody hearing a shot and seeing a car in that direction would naturally assume it was simply a back-fire or a burst tyre, or something."

Joyce rushed on rather too quickly after her first sentence. We all knew only too well that Hugh was a crack shot and was even able to do trick shooting.

"I'll speak to the porter about the car," Hugh said, a little subdued, drawing his dark brows together thoughtfully, and almost immediately he rose to go.

"And don't forget what I said, Harriet!" he emphasised as he took leave of her. "Get in touch with me the minute you think the police are making too big a nuisance of themselves and I'll see about a solicitor; I know a first-rate chap. The police go blundering into things without caring at all about people's feelings, but I'll soon know if they are exceeding their rights."

Which was more than I should, I thought, but that was the way to speak impressively, no doubt. Harriet seemed to be quite cheered by the degree of strength and confidence which he radiated.

The sight of my face seemed to have the opposite effect on her when she returned from letting Hugh out.

"The inquest to-morrow is going to be pretty horrible, Henry," she said in a troubled voice. "I do wish by some miracle they would get the criminal before then."

"An inquest is usually a formality; there's no need to worry," I said in what I hoped was a hearty, confident manner. "The police will no doubt instruct them to return an open verdict."

'I was hazy on this point, but I fancied I had read something like this somewhere. I liked to think that it would not be a searching examination but simply, as I had so largely promised Harriet, a mere formality. "You'd better give Ellen strict instructions just to answer 'yes' and 'no,'" I said with a faint smile.

"Ellen will have every good intention of doing the right thing," Harriet replied with an answering smile.

"I wonder if they've found the weapon which fired the shot?" Joyce asked suddenly, so suddenly that I felt my face go hot and I know Joyce marked my change of colour.

"Not so far as I know," Harriet answered quietly.

"By the way, Henry, I let Inspector Caldwell know that my revolver was missing."

"I was hoping you'd have come across it," I said. "*In a hurried removal things often get put in the wrong place.*"

"Yes," she agreed quietly. "I can't even now exactly recall how, when, and where I did pack it."

"It may just have got buried," I suggested consolingly. "In any case the calibre of the bullet which killed Cyril may be quite different."

"I'm hoping so," Harriet agreed.

But remembering the size of the revolver which I had found in the front garden, I knew in my heart that it was too much to hope for.

CHAPTER FIVE

I WAS too concerned at the inquest as to the questions I might be asked and how I should answer them to pay as much attention as I ought to the proceedings, and even after I had been questioned I found my mind

churning up what I had said for fear I might have said one word too much. I am sure that I couldn't have felt worse had I indeed killed Cyril Loder. The amount of evidence I was concealing, and seemed now doomed to continue concealing, gave me a feeling of being so involved that to be found out would be tantamount to being convicted of the crime.

The whole thing proceeded in a quiet and orderly manner, so far as I could judge. Even Ellen acquitted herself with comparatively few tears and quite terse answers. It appeared that my prophecy was coming true until, after a few quiet and considerate questions to Harriet, the Coroner asked :

“ Do you recognise this revolver ? ”

There was a big stir then, and I know I had a nasty jolt.

“ Yes ! It belonged to me,” Harriet replied steadily. “ It was missing when I returned to the flat. I reported its loss to the police.”

I found my eyes glued on the Coroner as though he were some magician who would next produce an object and ask :

“ Do you recognise this dog ? ”

But I was spared that. He asked her one or two more formal questions, but I was left on the rack of suspense. I could not say definitely from where I was sitting whether it was the one I had picked up in the front garden. It was certainly a replica of it, and Harriet must have seen the notches in the one the Coroner had. How I could kick myself for not having remembered at the time about those notches ; I did not now know whether another gun had been involved or not, or, if it were the same gun, how, and why, and by whom had it been recovered and what was the mystery behind it all.

The verdict was “ Murder by some person or persons

unknown," as we had expected, and, as though this were a signal for the Police to roll up their sleeves and set to work unhampered by any formalities, things began to happen. I really think the police had arranged to have the question of the ownership of the gun sprung on Harriet like it was. It had stood out so from the other trivial questions and much time had elapsed since the police-surgeon's evidence, regarding the calibre of the bullet, had been given. No mention had been made then of whether the weapon had been traced or not.

I had to go up to my office in Town immediately after the inquest to settle one or two outstanding matters which I had left open. I knew it would not take long and I rather hoped that in the journey there and back I might be able to arrange more clearly the facts which so far were the merest jumble in my mind.

The early editions of the evening papers were on the streets as I made my way to the office, but I did not trouble to buy one. I would try to keep my mind away from the subject for a while. I vaguely hoped for some inspiration by returning fresh to the subject.

However, I had no sooner settled the outstanding matters at the office than my partner, Mr. James, a man much older than I and who has known me since I was a boy, said :

"I've just been reading the result of the inquest, Henry."

"Yes," I replied half-heartedly. "We expected that verdict."

"Things don't look exactly too rosy for the widow," he went on, avoiding my eye.

"It's a mix-up altogether," I said vaguely. "Cyril Loder was the type of man who might have many secret enemies, but unfortunately the chain of circum-

stances and circumstantial evidence links up, from the police point of view, in one direction."

"You don't think she did it, then?"

"I know she didn't," I said emphatically and this seemed to startle him very much.

It wasn't until I was on my way back that it dawned upon me that Malcolm James knew all my early history. The poor old fellow apparently thought I was being so emphatic about Harriet's innocence because I knew who the guilty person was, and since I had been the only other person there—so far as was publicly known—he would be getting anxious for the reputation of the firm.

As yet I had not escaped from things long enough to see everything in its right perspective, nor did I escape from it in the compartment returning home, for though I chose an empty compartment it did not remain empty long and no sooner was the train in motion than the others began discussing the latest murder.

"Nasty business," one said, pointing to the headlines.

"Yes, I've just been reading the result of the inquest," the other agreed, only too ready to take verbal action, as I had so often done before in cases in which I wasn't concerned, in the clearing up of a murder mystery.

"It's obviously the wife," Number One decided. "You can tell that from the way the inquest went. Hardly any important questions asked and then the revolver produced like that. The wife admits to a violent quarrel, they were parting, there were only the two of them in the house, and now it's her revolver that's fired the shot."

"She'd have done better to have confessed to it at once and pleaded self-defence or provocation or something," the other agreed sagely. "It makes it all seem so cold-blooded as it is."

I got up suddenly and went and stood in the corridor. I couldn't bear to sit listening to them speaking about Harriet so callously as though it were all over bar the rope around her neck. I tried hard to concentrate my mind on my activities of the previous afternoon when Joyce had helped me on a tour of the various houses mentioned in the mystery diary. My object had been to whittle the list down to the names which had coincided at every social gathering since amongst these, I bargained, must be the owner of the diary.

I produced my note-book and studied the names. There were only three ; three people who had been present at such of the social gatherings mentioned in the diary as I had remembered and, consequently, one of them must in all probability be the owner of the diary and, possibly, either the murderer, or with exact knowledge of the murder, else why should he have known where and how the diary was taken ? Somebody, some third party had been on the watch all the time, and that third party was probably one of the following :

Hugh Paisley.

Elaine Freer.

George Padley.

Elaine Freer I knew as a married woman separated from her husband, a woman past her first youth, well-dressed, well made-up, and good-looking in a thin, dark, haggard sort of way. I did not know very much about her except that she was a dubious sort of person.

George Padley was a friend of Cyril's. They had gone about a good deal together in the past, particularly to races or anywhere where gambling was possible. I thought I remembered hearing that George Padley, among his many other activities, owned a book-making business in Town.

I concentrated on Hugh first, since I knew him so well. The other two I knew only slightly, and what I did know of them was mainly by hearsay, and I hope I have learned more sense than to come to any conclusions on such flimsy evidence. I would find out about them personally later on. For the moment I could mentally dissect Hugh.

Was he in love with Harriet ? Of this I wasn't sure. I knew he was attracted to her and I knew they had a good deal in common, but Hugh was good at masking his feelings. Hugh was well-to-do and, in some ways, in a superior social position to Cyril's. Supposing, just for the sake of argument, that Hugh was very much in love with Harriet and had perhaps been present during that bitter scene between husband and wife without either of them knowing. What effect would it have had on Hugh to know that Cyril had struck Harriet and called her terrible names ?

I tried to put myself in Hugh's place. He is a big, strong man ; surely his first reaction would be to rush in and knock Cyril down ? Or would he have considered Harriet's feelings and decided not to let her know that he had been the unwilling witness of her humiliation ? Had he waited, still unseen, determined to settle with Cyril ? Had he at that moment planned murder ? Had he thought to free Harriet from an attachment which was wholly unsatisfactory and leave her free to marry Hugh Paisley ?

For the life of me I could hardly imagine Hugh shooting Cyril from behind with the idea of freeing Harriet. The risks would be too great. Besides, she was separating from him in any case, and may in due time have obtained a divorce. Hugh, unlike me, has no strong prejudice against divorce. Quite the contrary. He quite honestly thinks people are fools to attempt to swim against the matrimonial tide in the hope that

one day it will turn. The marriage vow for him is simply : " For Better or for Divorce."

Knowing Hugh so well, knowing the comfort in which he lived, I could not associate him with a murder no matter how safe he might have felt in the committing of it. For one thing, had he murdered for Harriet's sake, surely he would have seen that she would be the first suspect ? No. Hugh was clever enough to realise there were other ways in which he could hit Cyril where it hurt. The mere fact of his marrying Harriet after she was free would have been sufficient for a man like Cyril to put up with. He wasn't indifferent to Harriet, and it would goad him to see her happier and in a better station of life than she had been as his wife.

Being now sure that Hugh would not even in a passion murder anyone, least of all Cyril for Harriet's sake, or for any woman's sake for that matter, I could think of no other reason why Hugh should wish to see Cyril dead. And in these circumstances I felt sure that I could safely strike him from my list of suspects or at the most leave a very faint question-mark after his name. Elaine Freer and George Padley were, in my opinion, the more likely suspects, though I could not help wondering as I replaced my notebook and alighted from the train, whether it was the fact that they were almost strangers to me which made it seem far more logical that they should be concerned in a cowardly murder. It is easy to pin horrible things on to people we don't know, or scarcely know. We may dislike many of our acquaintances, but never sufficiently to imagine that they could get caught up in something completely unpleasant. It is almost a reflection on ourselves for having them in our circle even to toy with the idea. So with some relief and much determination I decided to find out exactly what my two suspects were doing on the date and time concerned.

My spirits began to rise. I was actually getting somewhere at last. With no help and not daring to confide in anyone what I knew, I had arrived at the names of two possible suspects whose existence, so far as the case went, was not known to the police. Perhaps, after all, it had been an inspiration keeping the diary. Had it not been stolen from me, I should have dismissed it as worthless.

But, as usual when I begin to get pleased with myself, the necessary douche of cold water was waiting. I could see at once from Gell's expression of contented misery that there had been a fresh development in my absence, and when I saw Joyce emerge from the kitchen, I knew the worst.

"They've arrested Harriet?" I said anxiously.

"Well, they call it detaining her for further questioning," she responded. "But everybody seemed to be expecting it. Maybe she'll come back later on. I came round to tell you, but I'm going back to the flat just in case. I'll have a cup of tea with you first, though. You look as if you need one."

This news was naturally very disturbing. Circumstantial evidence can certainly be very damning and it was strong enough in this instance, at least from a police point of view, to put Harriet on trial for her life. The only gleam of hope was that she had not so far been arrested on suspicion. That there should be some doubt at the moment from the legal aspect was vaguely consoling. The consolation lasted exactly as long as it took me to realise that they might be hesitating simply because they thought somebody else had been involved and they wanted to make the thing complete when they did strike. It was Mrs. Gell who robbed me of my gleam of hope.

As she waddled in with the tea and set it down, she announced in her best graveside manner :

"There's been a plain-clothes man here. I suspected he was from the police, so I was very circumspect, very circumspect indeed. I told 'im no more than I meant to tell 'im and Weekes kept out of his way. But Gell and I didn't like the way he picked up a pair of your shoes which Gell had been cleaning. He looked at the soles a long time, measuring-'em like you might say with his mind's eye."

"Ha-ah! Guardy," Joyce accused. "They suspect you. Look for the most unlikely person and there's your criminal."

"I'll bet somebody's been telling them about your Real Feelings for the bereaved widow," Mrs. Gell said darkly. "Not being able to see beyond their noses they'll deduce that it's a Cream Pashionel. They don't care so long as they 'ave a good excuse to hang someone, then everyone's satisfied."

Joyce was choking a little over her cup of tea and, after giving her a helpful thump on the back, Mrs. Gell retired, and I felt pretty much the same as though the heavy impact of a battering-ram had been withdrawn to prepare for a new and heavier charge.

"Mrs. Gell's priceless! I do love her, Guardy," Joyce murmured when she could get her breath. "I think her cup of happiness would be full if they arrested you. Her natural urge to go the whole morbid hog might even get the better of her devotion to you. Already she can see her photo in her Daily What-Not, with the headline: "My Last Word with my Condemned Master."

My sense of humour must have deserted me. I could see nothing at all funny in it, though I tried a feeble sort of smile. With a queer, churned-up feeling inside, I was remembering how I had tramped in the soft earth beneath the open window of the Loder's home looking for a weapon. I had been careful about finger-

prints, but I had never once given my feet a thought.

"The hunted man sees the net closing round him," Joyce's voice interrupted my unpleasant thoughts. "Why not go and make a clean breast of everything, Guardy? It's obvious you have something on your mind. You'll feel heaps better when you know the worst they can do to you."

Although she spoke in her usual teasing voice, I could see her blue eyes were very serious.

"I was fool enough to tramp about the garden looking for the criminal," I explained. "It's just occurred to me that I left footprints all over the place."

"Well, don't worry about that," Joyce urged, brightening visibly. "They knew you were there. If they imagine it was a put-up job between you and Harriet then they must have sense to see that there was absolutely no reason at all why you should have rung up the police. You could have locked up the house and waited for the body to be discovered months later when all clues would have vanished."

"Unless one were hoping by the very boldness of attack to disarm suspicion," I pointed out.

"What a terrible pity you happened to call in that night!" Joyce said impulsively. "I'm sure things would have been more simple."

"I was inclined to think so at first," I nodded, "but after thinking it all over, and bearing in mind everything as it was, what would have happened? Harriet was about to leave and in ten minutes would have gone, locking up the house, quite oblivious of the fact that her husband was lying murdered in the dining-room. In due course the storage-removal men would have turned up, seen the open window, if Cyril hadn't left a key with them, and immediately the body would have been found. Then what would Harriet's position have been? A lot worse than it is now, I think."

Indeed I obtained a good deal of consolation from this thought and the ready way in which Joyce agreed with me.

"Except for the proviso," she finished, surprisingly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"I mean the reservation in your own mind, Guardy. Your appearance was fortunate in many ways, but not in the way which is preying on your mind. I'd tell someone, if I were you," she coaxed. "It's probably a great big mountain out a of tiny, harmless molehill."

"Well, since you must know, Joyce, and since I think I shall have to own up to the police in any case now that things have gone so far, I meddled in things. I picked up a revolver outside the window and I was sure it was Harriet's. I must have panicked for fear they would jump to conclusions when I was so certain she was innocent. So I rolled it up in a bag and gave it to Judy to carry home, and that was the last I saw either of the revolver or Judy."

Joyce's mouth dropped open, her eyes grew bigger and bigger.

"Why, Guardy!" she cried in complete amazement, as though seeing a side of me she had not dreamed existed. "But that makes you an Accessory after the Fact."

"As if I don't know!" I said a little sharply.

"And of course that explains your guilty, hunted look," she continued, nodding her fair head. "I'm not surprised, and yet, perhaps I'd have done the same on the spur of the moment," she conceded, and regretted it afterwards. "It would have been all right if Judy had landed home with it . . . By the way . . ." she broke off eagerly. "Was it the same revolver as the one produced at the inquest?"

"I'm not sure." After hesitating a little doubtfully, I went on more confidently: "It is almost identical in

appearance, but I feel fairly certain it isn't the one I picked up. I blamed myself for not noticing at the time whether there were any notches in or not, but I am convinced now that there weren't. I had forgotten them at the moment, but had they been there I'd have remarked them immediately. I had been present when each one had been notched and their associations were too vivid to be overlooked."

"Then," Joyce said slowly, weighing her words. "Somebody's being very clever. Somebody's making use of the fact that you feared suspicion might fall on Harriet. That means," she continued with rising excitement, "that you interrupted the murderer just after the crime and that he saw what you did and got Harriet's gun in its place."

"And that's the strange part about it," I frowned. "How was it possible for him to get the gun in the short space of time? Even Harriet herself, when I rang her up a little later wasn't sure in which case she had packed it. Who could possibly have found time to have gone through all her things to have found it and left no trace behind?"

"Nobody, except Harriet, or Ellen," Joyce agreed. "Unless, of course, Aunt Harriet didn't pack it. I mean," she rushed on hastily, "She was in great mental stress and may have put it out to be packed and the murderer picked it up like that."

"That's a possibility," I agreed, "but supposing he was so clever and omnipresent, how, after wandering all over the house, did he get away without anybody seeing a stranger about at all?"

"Well," Joyce volunteered a trifle warily and fixing me with her bright gaze, "I've been wondering about that hoarse friend of yours. It seems so odd to me that he, a complete stranger to you, should accost you in the darkness and tell you about Judy. How did

he know you had lost Judy ? How did he know you had a dog at all ? How did he know, supposing he had seen you with a Scottie, that it was your particular dog ? There's something fishy about Charlie Weekes, Guardy, and I am trying hard not to be prejudiced by his face. He looks a regular old lag ; I'm sure he's an adept in the art of telling the tale."

My apprehensions grew, as they always do when doubt is cast on any opinion I have formed. I rallied everything I could in my defence.

" Looking back, I think I have been taken in more often by people who are the picture of injured innocence, Joyce."

" Well, yes ! " Joyce admitted frankly. " I don't think he is as bad as his face, but, honestly, Guardy, I'm sure it would go against him in a Magistrates' court."

" It'll go against him all through life if somebody doesn't take pity on him." I emphasised, "and as a matter of fact I have taken pity on him. Since you're so probing, I'll tell you Charlie's history from the beginning, but it's to go no further than between you and me. Understand ? "

And having received Joyce's ready consent, I told her the whole story. I told it as a kind of rehearsal for when I might at length have to tell it to the cold eye of Inspector Caldwell. I tried to make it sound convincing and natural. I knew that if it took Joyce's breath away, I'd have little hope where the Inspector was concerned.

I awaited her reactions anxiously as the story was unfolded. Alas for my hopes ! Joyce seemed absolutely dumbfounded, her nice eyes grew big and amazed and her jaw sagged in a most unbecoming fashion. She honestly looked as though she thought the words which were coming out of my mouth couldn't possibly be the same as the ones entering her ears.

"But, Guardy . . . !" she gasped at the end of it, and paused, for once unable to think of something to say.

"Oh, I know !" I finished, smiling at her because I felt pleased to think I had for once placed her at a loss for words. "You're convinced that Charlie must have murdered Cyril. No doubt he shot him in the back when he was going to 'phone the police. Then he took good care to make himself known to somebody near the scene, and hung about the whole time doing mysterious things to pin the blame on to someone he didn't know existed. And then, to disarm me still further, hung about for hours to pin the murder on to some mysterious person in a car who ran down Judy."

"Yes . . . No . . . !" Joyce hesitated thoughtfully. "In some ways, Guardy, you're rather shrewd, but terribly gullible." Obviously she had got her second wind. "If it wasn't Charlie Weekes, and, put that way, it's not too likely, you've been very lucky taking a chance like that."

"I know it wasn't Charlie Weekes," I affirmed calmly. "You would have had to see him how he appeared when he thrust the things into my hands. It was a different kind of terror from what he'd have shown if he had done the job. But I saw his face and I saw his point of view. He'd been in prison once and with a face like his and the fact that he had been robbing the house, well . . ."

"There's one thing," Joyce pointed out in some anxiety, "if you're heading for the gallows, Guardy, and are secretly relying on Charlie Weekes to put things right for you with an alibi if the worst comes to the worst, will it count for anything ? I mean, now that he's working here it might look like a put-up job. Even if by some stretch of imagination they accepted his hoarse protestations as gospel, that wouldn't prove

that you hadn't been in the house before he got there, would it? You were as near as matters to the scene of the crime, you stand to gain financially by Uncle Cyril's death, not to mention—other things," she finished lamely. Even Joyce, apparently, has her limits.

"If the police can't find anybody more likely," I said solemnly, not sorry for a chance to bring home to Joyce with what levity she had previously been treating the whole situation—particularly my attitude towards it, "I think I'd provide as water-tight a suspect as they could find for a murder trial."

"But, Guardy, I'm serious!" Joyce said in a reproving Head Prefect tone of voice.

"So am I," I retorted. "So serious that when anybody mentions the crime I go off into a kind of petrified day-dream, and the mere sight of a policeman gives me a furtive, hunted look."

Joyce dimpled suddenly.

"Now, darling, don't be touchy," she said mildly. "I was only trying to worm out your guilty secret, and I used the word 'furtive' deliberately to make you angry; any expression was better than the guilty one you had at the time. And I succeeded," she ended proudly.

"To return to the main point of discussion, Joyce," I continued with dignity, "the point that is troubling me all the time is: 'Ought I to make a clean breast of the whole business to Inspector Caldwell and let him sort out as best he can what clues there might or might not be in the mystery!'"

Joyce cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, fixing her eyes steadily on me as if mentally putting herself in the Inspector's shoes and trying to visualise his reactions.

"No!" she returned emphatically at last. "So

far as I can see it, the answer from every angle is 'No!' Supposing he believed every word you said as gospel? The result would be simply to put poor Aunt Harriet on the spot worse than ever as the only likely suspect. And if he didn't believe you, or thought you were trying to throw red herrings, and what-not, he'd come to the conclusion that you had some sort of a hand in it all, which would be hardly any different from what the position is as it now stands. You and Harriet were apparently so forthcoming about the murder and sending for the police so promptly that it seems to have shaken the Inspector's confidence a little. I'm sure he feels he can't touch Harriet alone until he is more certain where you stand in the matter. Did you commit the murder and is she shielding you, or did she commit it and are you shielding her, or was it a put-up job in which you both had an equal share? That's what's going on behind those cold gooseberry-eyes of Inspector Caldwell, if you ask me anything. And all that he has got to help him is that it appears to be Harriet's revolver which fired the shot."

"But I'm certain it wasn't Harriet's revolver," I pointed out, "and if they believe my story that proves there's another revolver involved and makes things easier for Harriet."

"If they believe your story," Joyce said pointedly, "they can find out in a much simpler way. Better keep mum, Guardy, unless the worst comes to the worst. Simply drop him a hint to have the bullet tested. I was reading a detective yarn in which they consulted a ballistics expert, I think he was called, and he tested the gun to see whether the marks inside it coincided with those on the bullet. You see," she finished, looking at me triumphantly, "they will know at once when it's proved to be the wrong revolver that someone is trying to pin it on to Harriet and that another

revolver must have been used. That is, if you are sure there was another," she added dubiously.

"Why, Joyce!" I complimented her, feeling immeasurably relieved, "that suggestion simplifies everything. It's the thought of that first revolver which has been troubling me so much. It will set them off searching for it at once. I'll get in touch with Inspector Caldwell immediately."

"I hope he doesn't drag the river and find the revolver in Judy's mouth," she said cheerfully. "Then the fat would be in the fire."

"Most entertaining thought," I retorted tartly.

"Might as well face all possibilities before plunging," she explained unabashed. "You don't want to act so that when the truth does eventually come out it will merely look as though you've been trying hard to cover your tracks."

It cheered me somewhat to have Joyce in a teasing mood once more. Apparently she didn't think the situation very serious and the fact that she agreed with me in thinking that no good could come of confessing to the police what I had done, eased my conscience considerably.

"I wish I could get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding Judy's disappearance," I confided in Joyce as we set out, I to call on Inspector Caldwell and Joyce to return to Harriet's flat. "I can't help feeling that there's something very important attached to that episode."

I did not dwell on my anxiety for Judy's welfare or to know whether she was alive or dead. I rather hoped for the latter. The thought of a swift end was preferable to thinking she might be injured and fretting after me. I had had her a long time and she was a devoted little animal; an old dog doesn't resign itself easily to a change.

"Call in at the flat on your return," Joyce said kindly as though sensing the direction of my thoughts. "I expect Aunt Harriet will be back any minute even if she hasn't already returned."

And on this cheerful and optimistic note we parted. I was glad of a few minutes to myself to rearrange my thoughts. I did not want to appear to be calling at the police station especially to make my bright statement ~~re~~ the bullet and revolver. I did not want to give the Inspector any cause to wonder why I was so sure that bullet and gun could not coincide exactly.

To my immeasurable relief Caldwell was not at the station, but the friendly face of Sergeant Wrigley met me as I entered. I spent some time condoling with him on his recent bereavement, though he assured me that it had been a "happy release" as his father had "suffered cruel" during the past few years.

I told him that Judy was still missing and from that subject we passed quite easily on to the question of the murder and the inquest of that afternoon.

"By the way," I asked as casually as I could, "I heard when I got back from a flying visit to my firm that Mrs. Loder had been detained. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no, sir!" the sergeant replied at once. "The Inspector wanted to get the matter of the gun straightened out. It's a good job she reported that it was missing like she did. After all, if she had done it she would have been able to have got rid of it good and proper instead of leaving it nice and handy to be picked up as you might say, unless of course she panicked."

"Do you always make quite sure that the bullet in question was actually fired from the gun?" I asked casually.

"In this case we have, Mr. Foster. We don't like to take things for granted. Mrs. Loder says the gun

was hers, and that she didn't miss it until after she got to the flat. She said it was you who asked her about it otherwise she would not have given it a thought. What made you think it might be missing ? " he asked conversationally, but there was an alertness in his usually mild eye which was somewhat disconcerting.

" I was uneasy on her behalf. I knew the position she would be placed in and I didn't want to think that there might be too strong a chain of circumstantial evidence," I explained in what I could only hope was a natural and not a " furtive " manner. " I was trying to reassure myself on every point. When a husband and wife are on the point of parting and there is known bitterness between them, then it would be a grand opportunity for a third party to pay off a score knowing that the limelight would not be focused on him."

" Yes, but who else could have got hold of her revolver ? " he asked. " She admits to packing it shortly before the tragedy, and nobody else was in the house, so far as we know, but her husband and the maid. We haven't questioned the maid very closely yet, but, on the surface, she hardly has a motive except devotion to her mistress."

" But you say you've had the bullet tested by an expert," I rushed in excitedly, " so surely you must know that Mrs. Loder's gun didn't fire the shot."

There was a pause. Sergeant Wrigley looked at me as though he had landed the very reply he had been angling for.

" I'm surprised you should be so certain about that, Mr. Foster," he said genially. " It has been established beyond all doubt that the gun in our possession, the one which Mrs. Loder unhesitatingly identifies as her own, fired the shot which killed her husband."

CHAPTER SIX

WELL, I'd acted true to type, I jeered at myself as I left the police station knowing only too well that I had touched off a lively train of thought in Sergeant Wrigley's receptive mind. What a difference personality can make! Had it been Inspector Caldwell, his cold eye would have kept me constantly on my guard. I would have been conscious of his dissecting knife the whole time, but under the genial anaesthetic of Sergeant Wrigley's manner I would sooner or later utter my most secret thoughts. Wrigley and Caldwell reminded me suddenly of the Walrus and the Carpenter. One smart little oyster had been very cleverly opened between them.

But life is never either unrelieved gloom or unalloyed joy. As I was mentally kicking myself in the direction of Harriet's flat I almost bumped into George Padmore. It was getting dark but we were both passing a street lamp.

"'Lo, Foster!" he said in his hail-fellow-well-met manner. "Did I see you emerge from the police station? Have they let you out on bail?" he asked heartily, guffawing at his own joke, because I am generally regarded as inoffensive.

"How do you do, Padmore," I replied more amiably than I might have done had it not been for the fact that I was so anxious to see him. "As a matter of fact I lost my dog the other evening, and I keep enquiring about her."

I felt that sudden mention of my dog ought to bring some reaction to the person who happened to be on

the scene of the crime, for the criminal was, I felt sure, the person responsible for Judy's disappearance.

But it is too much to expect any sort of reaction from a man like George Padmore who had worn out his emotions years ago and simply went about portly, flabby, trying to look as if he were enjoying life while the fixed beam on his face was belied by the dead look in his round eyes.

"Bad luck, old man. I should get another dog and stop worrying if I were you."

He'd already started putting on that "well-I-must-be-off-I've-got-a-pal-waiting-round-the-corner" expression, now that I didn't appear to have anything bright enough to report to tickle his jaded palate, so I hastened on with :

"And, of course, I was glad of an excuse to get talking about poor Cyril's murder. One cannot help wondering what the police have up their sleeves, can one ? "

"Bad business that. It looks bad for Harriet. Not that I'd have thought her the type for shooting anyone, mind you. She could wither poor Cyril up with a look without troubling herself any further. I don't mind admitting that I was surprised when I heard it was Cyril who was shot. I could have believed it the other way on. She could and did goad him, you know, in that deadly quiet way of hers. Bad match from the beginning. Not old Cyril's type at all."

Well, different people have different ways of looking at things. Apparently George's sympathies were with Cyril, but he may just have been bluffing, so I shifted the focus of the conversation a little.

"I'm convinced Harriet didn't do it," I said crisply. "You knew Cyril pretty well, Padmore. Has he been up against anybody lately, anybody who might have had a serious grudge against him ? "

He shrugged non-committally.

"It's hard to say. I expect people have grudges against me, or you, but how far does a grudge have to go to turn into a shooting match? For that matter, Cyril and I had a bust-up only a couple of days before his death . . ." he laughed a little self-consciously and considering that he was one of my suspects I could not help pricking up my ears. "Jolly good job, in view of the fact that our quarrel was a somewhat public one, that I have an alibi for the night of the 24th, eh, old man? I was, thank my lucky stars, nearly fifty miles away."

"I hadn't heard you'd quarrelled," I said lamely, my spirits sinking once more.

"It wouldn't have been much ordinarily. Cyril was in a vile mood that night, what with things in a mess at home, and he'd lost a bit on the races that day, and—er—other things," he finished vaguely.

"Was Elaine Freer in those 'other things?'" I asked making a shot in the dark.

His jaw did seem to drop at that and he looked at me with more attention.

"Don't tell me that Harriet knew all about *her*," he exclaimed. "No wonder the fat was in the fire if that's come out. It might account for . . ." he pulled himself up swiftly. "Oh, but that wouldn't make all that difference. It isn't as if she was the first. Harriet knew her husband's ways years ago."

The objectionableness of George's revelations was outweighed for the moment by the fact that I was learning something which might have a definite bearing on the crime. Elaine Freer began to loom very large in the foreground of my suspicions. Once more my self-confidence began slowly to revive.

"Mrs. Freer is separated from her husband, isn't she?" I asked casually, "or is she divorced?"

" Oh, there's been some talk of a divorce lately, only I think it is he who is threatening to divorce her. That was one of the things which had put the wind up Cyril. It would be simply playing into Harriet's hands . . . " He broke off abruptly as if he realised he was letting out secrets. It was more obvious than ever to me that George Padmore had been a closer companion of Cyril's and more in his confidence than I had thought.

" Some people do make a mess of their lives, don't they ? " I commented vaguely as though what he had been saying had little or no interest for me.

" I always warned Cyril that the Freer woman would make trouble," George said more easily. " She's that calculating type. It's my belief she'd been trying to fix things so that Cyril would have to marry her. He was properly worked up about it that night . . . "

He broke off again and ended rather hurriedly :

" Well, I've got an appointment to keep. Might have a chance of talking it over some other time. Sticky business, and bad luck for Cyril."

And with that he took his leave as though afraid he might say something which he might afterwards regret.

But I had been given quite enough food for thought as I returned home for my belated dinner. I decided to stroll round to Harriet's flat afterwards. I had omitted to ask Wrigley whether she had been detained or not, but somehow I had a feeling that the police intended to make no arrest until they were certain of how I stood in the matter. By now they were no doubt congratulating themselves on giving me enough rope with which to hang myself.

" Mrs. Loder 'phoned and would like a word with you when you came in," Mrs. Gell announced. " I was that pleased to know she wasn't going to spend the night in a prison cell, though I was dubious, very

dubious," she added shaking her large head mysteriously, "when I 'eard they had got her at the station."

"It's one thing on top of another the whole time, isn't it, Mrs. Gell?" I replied, producing, for want of something better to say, one of the vague generalities in which she gloried.

"I shall remember this day as long as I live," she said weightily.

"And perhaps this is nothing to what lies ahead," I continued in the same strain.

"Aye, there's still a murder trial for Someone, then the 'anging," Mrs. Gell nodded, savouring it all. Words cannot describe the manner in which she contemplated events to come. Her round, pale face, which ought by design to have been so motherly and cheerful, never appeared other than as a pale moon brooding over earthly horrors, no matter how pleasant and comfortable her life was. But, as in this instance, when there was something really to brood over, there was more than a hint of satisfied content, though the expression was to all intents and purposes the same.

"We'll have to bear up somehow, Mrs. Gell," I sighed. "Would you mind 'phoning Mrs. Loder and saying I'll be along immediately after dinner? Perhaps she has something to tell me which had better not be said over the 'phone."

I knew it was the quickest way of getting my dinner served and eaten. Unless I gave her something to do and a reason for my wishing to get her well-cooked meal over quickly, I'd be doomed to give my responses to her lugubrious chant for far longer than I would care to contemplate.

Gell had a word to say to me about Charlie Weekes when I was on my way out again.

"'E did wonder if he ought to wait for you coming in," he said, "but I told him it would be quite orlright

to go 'ome and I let 'im take what was left of the cold pie after lunch, seeing that 'is wife isn't 'ome to see to things."

"Thank you, Gell," I said warmly, relieved to think that Charlie had made such a good impression as to elicit this spontaneous token. "I hope he will be a help to you—apart from my personal reasons for wanting him on hand," I added darkly.

"He is very willing to work," Gell replied nodding at me in the matey way he has where I am concerned. "It's been a big relief finding 'im so willing. It gave us a kind of breather for going to the inquest, 'im not being partikler about going."

"I'm very pleased indeed, Gell," I replied with a motion towards the front door. "You deserve more help than you've been having lately."

I made my escape and hurried in the direction of Harriet's flat. It was Joyce who let me in, explaining that it was Ellen's night out. She added that she was busy making the coffee and I was to go straight in.

"Poor Aunt Harriet looks worn out," she added. "Her position is a rotten one, isn't it?"

I was glad to have Joyce out of the way while I had a few words with Harriet, so I came to the point almost immediately.

"Harriet," I began as I settled myself facing her, "have you had anything to do with Mrs. Freer lately?"

The pupils of her eyes widened and contracted suddenly and I knew I had touched a sore spot.

"Why should you mention her, Henry?" she asked in a low voice.

"I wanted to ask you before Joyce returned," I said hurriedly, "otherwise I wouldn't have sprung it on you like this."

"She called to see me about two weeks ago suggesting

that I should divorce Cyril," she said steadily, but the colour rushed into her pale cheeks.

"Did Cyril know of the visit?" I asked, trying to speak calmly, but with anger burning in my heart.

"Not so far as I know," she replied proudly. "I didn't mention it to him. I simply told her that I did not believe in divorce and that in any case divorce was no cure for a man like Cyril. I added that Cyril himself had never spoken of a divorce in relation to any of his other many affairs and that he hadn't in this, and I could hardly presume that he was making an exception in her case . . . I knew I was lashing her, Henry, but I'm only human, after all, and I'd had a lot to put up with. It wasn't as though there were any compensations so far as I could see. With some men one can forgive a lot, but Cyril . . ." she ended with an expressive shrug which was more descriptive than words.

"Do you think she's the type to turn revengeful if she found things weren't working the way she had planned?" I asked, trying to put the question as delicately as I could.

Harriet hesitated uncomfortably, fully appreciating my meaning.

"I wasn't greatly impressed by her," she said reluctantly at last, and then continued with a flicker of a smile: "But then, I was hardly likely to be, so put that down simply as prejudice, Henry, and consider the whole matter with an open mind."

"There must be someone, somewhere," I exploded half-exasperated by my own impotence. "It's horrible to think that you have to bear suspicions and questionings after what you have put up with for so long and so patiently."

"I deserve to pay for being such a fool when I was young," she said bitterly. "One finds it hard to forgive

oneself for deliberately walking into misfortune. It wasn't as though I was completely blind to Cyril's character when I married him. But I was attracted enough and misguided enough to think that my influence on him would counteract his wild ways." She gave a short laugh. "The sublime egoism of youth."

"There's one thing, Harriet," I consoled her, "you've nothing really to reproach yourself with, you know. You tried hard all the time to make the best of a bad bargain. If Cyril had had anything at all in him worth building on, he would have responded in time. One pays bitterly in this life for mistakes, but one doesn't get kicked all the time. I'm a firm believer in the promise that the years the locusts have eaten shall be given back."

She looked across at me and for a moment her grey-blue eyes misted over with tears.

"You're wonderfully nice, Henry," she said unsteadily, but I could see that she was feeling much better for the way I had spoken to her.

Joyce, who is usually so quick, now entered with the coffee. Mentally I gave her a good mark for using her tact to leave us alone together for a short while. It had been long enough for my main purpose.

I left them after we had had coffee. I did not intend to stay long under the circumstances. I meant, on my way home, to try to sort out the various happenings of the day and get everything and everybody in the right perspective as becomes the omnipotent detective of fiction. But, alas! So weak is the real man. My mind was an absolute blank except for the echo of a soft, tremulous voice which said: "You're wonderfully nice, Henry."

And for a man who had as good as put his head into a noose, I felt most ridiculously happy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My first thoughts the following morning, were, I am pleased to say, on more practical lines.

"How," I wondered as I shaved, does one set about questioning a person one doesn't know, without any authority for questioning at all? The many detectives of fiction whom I had hoped, in my first moment of folly, to emulate, usually have some legal or private status for what would otherwise simply be the interference of a busybody. Their names mostly caused cheeks to pale and suspects to tremble and begin at once scattering such a profusion of red herrings as to give themselves away to the astute sleuth.

But where did I stand? Even if I could rely on a day's freedom for solving the whole mystery, what chance had I? How could I approach Mrs. Freer and induce her to give herself away, if indeed she had committed the crime, or been a party to it? In any case, I knew I couldn't hope to get much out of her, even if I plucked up enough courage for calling on her. A woman like her would be two or three moves ahead of me the whole time and I should simply come away believing as gospel everything she cared to tell me.

There's nothing worse than losing confidence in oneself, and as I finished shaving I had got to that state of mind in which the only thing I could hope to do for Harriet was to get hanged myself and so save her. It was a gloomy prospect, and I was human enough to want to live to see her undying gratitude. After breakfast, however, things looked a bit brighter in the way they have when one has eaten a well-cooked meal. Also the sound of Charlie Weekes' hoarse voice re-

minded me that I wasn't entirely without a stooge, the latter usually being essential to any real or amateur detective. If I was a Watson without his Sherlock, at least I could be a Watson with a stooge. The very fact of having someone only too willing to help in any unpleasant task, and whose intelligence is fortunately inferior to one's own, has a stimulating effect which is bound to react to the good of all concerned.

I interviewed Charlie in my study.

"I hope your wife is going on all right, Weekes?" I asked.

"She's still on the danger list but there's a big improvement, Guv'nor," came the hoarse but ready rejoinder. "I took the liberty of telling them they could 'phone 'ere if there was anything urgent. It'll sort of set me mind at rest, if you understand my meaning."

"That's quite all right," I nodded. "I hope everything will continue to go well for her."

"It's bucking 'er up no end to know that I've got a job," he burst out, his brown eyes fixed on me with a look similar to what I have seen day after day in Judy's eyes. "Cor, you've been a pal, Guv'nor! If it'd come out what I'd bin up to, and that body there an all, it'd 've killed 'er, stright it would. I'd cut me throat if that 'appened. She's a good sort is Meg. She's not strong, but she never complains. I'd like to do something big for 'er."

There was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. He almost broke down every time he mentioned his wife. The poor fellow realised that he had been a broken reed to her, and I knew only too well the urge of a small man to do something big to impress the one he most wanted to impress, while succeeding only in making things worse.

"There's no need for you to worry," I answered reassuringly. "So far as I'm concerned there'll be no

need whatever for your name to be brought into it at all. So far as I can see it would do you a lot of harm and nobody any good, and that is a sufficient reason for my keeping quiet."

He was about to burst forth into passionate protestations of eternal gratitude, when I hastily prevented him by saying :

" So set your mind at rest and there may be many ways in which you can help, for, as you know now, other friends of mine are closely concerned in this matter. Your mind has been very upset by your own personal troubles, but as soon as you're able to think calmly again I want you to try to remember any person or anything which happened that evening near to the Loders' house. You were obviously the first person on the scene after the murder and when you are able to look back impartially you are sure to remember something."

I could see he was almost bursting to say something, and as soon as he could get a word in edgeways, he burst out.

" It came to me last night, Guv'nor ! I couldn't sleep what with all I'd got on my mind, and then I remembered. I'd been walking along, not meaning to pinch anything, you understand, but 'oping I might meet somebody who'd spare a bob. We were that 'ungry, and I was sort of looking at the 'ouses, wondering if there was any 'ope at any of them. It was sort of 'alf light and I was near the 'edge and I sort of 'eard somebody 'urrying and a lady came by quickly. She was all in black with a white face and she was kinda breathing quick and she made for a car up a side road. I never gave 'er another thought at the time as it was just then I saw the 'ouse with the front door swinging open, and the temptation came and . . . well, you know," he finished with his usual abject gesture.

With my mind full of Elaine Freer, I asked :

" Do you think you might recognise her again if you saw her ? "

His manner changed at once. He was now absolutely confident.

" I never forget a face, Guv. I'd pick 'er out anywhere."

This satisfied me. I felt I was getting somewhere. If Elaine Freer had been hovering round the scene of the crime, had indeed been the woman Charlie had seen hurrying away as he approached, then the whole thing began to clear up and there was hope once more.

" Good," I replied. " This may be very important, Weekes. Now, what I would like you to do is to spend the morning strolling around the area of Poplar Grove. If you see the woman you saw the night of the murder, make a note of the house which she leaves or enters and let me know. Return here for lunch if nothing has happened before then."

Since Mrs. Freer resided in the area of Poplar Grove I knew that if she happened to be the woman he saw, he would recognise her immediately she appeared. She is a distinct and even distinguished type of woman, and there would be no mistaking her. I did not give him any closer directions as I wanted to avoid giving a pointer for fear, in an excess of zeal to do what would be pleasing to me, a doubt might become a certainty.

Poor Charlie was pathetically glad to do something.

" I could take a sangwidge, Guv'nor," he said eagerly. " There's more chance of seeing people coming and going about midday."

" Very well," I agreed, since he seemed anxious to do what little he could thoroughly, " I'll ask Mrs. Gell to pack you something, though I'm hoping you will see the person you refer to before lunch."

I went along to the kitchen, and in an undertone, as

befitted the occasion, though there was none but the cat to overhear, I confided in Mrs. Gell that I was sending our handyman to Watch a House, and could she pack him out for the day, or at least until there were Developments.

Needless to say Charlie Weekes got a packed lunch fit for a King. The highest testimonials in the world could not have served him half so well as the fact that in some mysterious way he Knew Something and might one day be Pumped. It was consoling to think that if everything turned out happily, Charlie would be a welcome retainer so far as the Gells were concerned.

"There's a street call-box at the corner of Poplar Grove," I told Charlie as he was setting out ; "you can give me a call from there if necessary."

After he had gone, I had not the slightest idea what to do next. I was desperate for action, but inaction seemed to be my lot ; there was nothing I could think of doing except to drift around to Harriet's flat and talk things over, a temptation which I forced myself to resist.

There's nothing worse than feeling that there's a lot to be done and yet having nothing definite to do. It was as if I was just sitting round waiting for The Walrus or The Carpenter to call. I didn't mind which now. I had had a strong leaning towards Wrigley before, but I think I feared him the more now. I occupied part of the time in 'phoning through to my office to see if there were any important matters outstanding, and after this I engaged myself in writing a summary of things exactly as they had happened, hoping that seeing them written down I might be able to read the facts like a detective yarn and gain some of the inspirations I had often been so proud of when solving fictitious crimes.

By the time I had finished a summary of the sequence

of events which I have so far
at the front door followed i
ance of Mrs. Gell.

"I 'aven't answered the door yet," she announced in a conspiratorial tone of voice. "I could see it was a policeman by his 'elmet. I thought, if you wanted to be out, like, I could Deal with him."

"That will be all right, Mrs. Gell," I replied with more confidence than I felt. "I was expecting a call."

It was kind-hearted, sympathetic Sergeant Wrigley who appeared a couple of seconds later, but I had had the forethought to put the manuscript I had been working on out of sight. A couple of days earlier and I would have left it lying on the table convinced that the sergeant was my friend and that he had an understanding heart.

"Any developments, Sergeant?" I asked, motioning him to be seated.

"Oh, we plod along you know," he replied jovially. "It might seem slow going to some people but we get there in the end."

"You've not come to arrest me, I hope," I said boldly, in what I hoped was a joking manner.

"Not yet!" he replied, and beamed at me almost with admiration.

I felt disappointed in Wrigley. He had known me all these years as a most law-abiding and inoffensive citizen, and yet he could deliberately play cat-and-mouse with me as though I might be capable of a horrible murder.

But then, my reason rose to his defence, how many murderers in the past had been nice, law-abiding people? A life-time of good behaviour doesn't weigh against a murder. A man with fifty murders to his discredit fares no worse than his less ambitious brother. A man

can only be hanged once. Not that I am an advocate of wholesale crime, it was just that I was feeling sore that a lifetime of integrity seemed of little use to me now, caught up as I was in a chain of circumstantial evidence.

"I'm very glad you haven't pounced on Mrs. Loder, anyway," I resumed, counting my blessings out loud. "She had nothing to do with it."

"I'd like to be as sure as you are, Mr. Foster," he replied genially. "But, then, perhaps I should be if I knew as much as you do."

"If I can help you in any way, Sergeant," I replied earnestly, not knowing what else to say, "I shall be only too pleased."

"What I really came to enquire about," he said, stroking his big, blue-red chin, "was that fellow you took on yesterday. Do you know his history?"

"Do you mean Charlie Weekes?" I asked cautiously. "I am trying to help him to get a start; his wife's very ill. He told me he had been in prison once, if that's what you're trying to warn me about."

"M-m-m." It was a very uninformative sound. "Why is he loitering round Poplar Grove this morning? Did you know he was out?"

"Yes!" I replied to the last question not wishing to reply to the former.

"He could be run in for loitering, you know," Sergeant Wrigley said, his mild blue eyes staring speculatively at me. "But then I know you try to help these down-and-outs at times, and I thought I'd enquire first whether he'd been taking you in with the usual hard-luck story. It's a queer kind of employment to give a man, isn't it, sir? I mean, loitering like that when he's been in for housebreaking. It's not fair on the fellow."

And at that unfortunate moment the telephone bell

rang and I picked up the receiver knowing that it would be Charlie at the other end.

He was hoarser than ever with excitement, and I could hardly warn him that Sergeant Wrigley was at my elbow.

"I've just seen her, Guv'nor. The very one. There's no mistake. I followed 'er and she went to a 'ouse called "The Gables."

"Good work!" I said warmly. "That's exactly what I wanted to know. I should leave it now."

As I rang off, hoping I had made myself clear to Charlie without giving anything away to Wrigley, the latter commented, as if to nobody in particular:

"Anybody can understand a guilty man hiding things and trying to throw suspicion on to somebody else, but it beats me when a chap goes out of his way to throw suspicion on himself."

This remark depressed me very much. Surely I hadn't given things away so obviously as to make the police think I was pulling their law-abiding legs? Apparently Wrigley thought that no sane man could be such a fool as to let things drop, in the manner that I seemed to be doing, without some motive. At least he gave me credit for having more sense than to let such important hints drop if I really wished to hide them.

"Do you know Elaine Freer?" I asked casually.

He was at once alert. He licked his full red lips, his blunt black pencil, and flicked open his note-book.

"Has she any connection with the case?" he asked.

"Well, it might interest you to know that she paid Mrs. Loder a visit a short while ago and suggested that Mrs. Loder might divorce her husband."

Wrigley looked thoughtful and all blue-eyed innocence as he made a note of some sort.

"And Mrs. Freer was in the vicinity of the Loders'

home just before I called," I added. I don't know why I should have felt like a worm, but I did. All this was evidence, but I felt that I was taking a very unfair advantage of a woman in giving her away like this.

" Ah ! Did you see her yourself ? You perhaps spoke to her ? " Wrigley asked.

This was a bit of a poser, but I thought I could truthfully bring in Charlie at this point without the latter suffering any inconvenience.

" No ! " I replied. " That's what Charlie Weekes has been doing for me this morning. With my having, as you might say, such an uncomfortably close connection with the crime, naturally I'm doing what I can to help to clear up the mystery for the sake of all concerned."

" And where does Charlie Weekes come in ? " Wrigley asked patiently, apparently not wishing to hear a more lengthy apologia.

" I happened to meet him as I was taking my walk with Judy that evening," I said frankly. " He—er—sort of got talking to me, you know how these fellows are when they need help, though this is strictly between you and me, and as he seemed in bad straits and was quite candid with me, I told him I could give him a temporary job as handyman. It wasn't until this morning, when my mind cleared a little from all the worry I've been having that I questioned him as to any other people he might have seen in the vicinity, a fellow on the look-out for help as he was would naturally notice everybody, and he said he had seen a lady, all in black, hurrying away from that direction and turn up a side road—Waltham Drive it must have been—where her car was parked."

" And you thought of Mrs. Freer ? " Wrigley asked helpfully.

" Well, Charlie had given rather an accurate descrip-

tion of her : white face, all in black, that is roughly the effect, you know, and as he swore he never forgot a face, I posted him in the vicinity of Poplar Grove, and . . ."

"And?" queried Sergeant Wrigley encouragingly as I weakly gave way to the impulse to pause for dramatic effect.

"Well, it was he who 'phoned just now," I replied easily, enjoying the feeling of security which telling the truth always gives to me. "He informs me that he has seen her again, that he followed her, and that she entered 'The Gables,' which happens to be Mrs. Freer's home."

"And that'll give you something else to think about," were my rather triumphant thoughts. I felt sorry for Mrs. Freer, I even felt mean about putting the police on her trail, but after all I hardly knew her and it is easy to act callously when one is impersonal. Besides, I was only human; let any man have the bloodhounds hot on his trail and tell me that he doesn't feel an exquisite sense of relief when they pick up the scent of another unfortunate and turn in that direction, and I shall call him a liar, mentally, that is. I was never one for saying rude things to people.

The mystery of Cyril Loder's shooting now seemed to me to be solved. Mrs. Gell would be pleased to think that her prophecy of a "Cream Pashionel" had come true. I even felt slightly elated to think that the solution to the murder would provide an edifying moral for the good of straying husbands, and the moral tone of the district would be strengthened, at least while the nine days wonder lasted.

I came back to earth with a bump to find the sergeant's blue eyes fixed on me with rather vague speculation.

"You've been keeping quite a lot under your hat,

haven't you ? " he asked genially. " Have you anything else to say whilst we are on the subject ? "

" Surely what I've told you is more than sufficient," I said with dignity. " If you hadn't called when you did, I should no doubt have gone to see Mrs. Freer and got a full confession out of her."

" Better leave things to us, Mr. Foster," he urged, hastily and very earnestly. " This has certainly given us a new line to work on and I'm grateful to you, though I wish you'd let us know right away when anything like this crops up. You people do so fancy yourselves as amateur policemen with all this detective rubbish about, that you often do more harm than good."

I took the rebuke mildly ; there was a well-merited dose of truth in it.

" Well, you know, sergeant," I explained. " One doesn't like to be a tell-tale, and one likes to be sure of one's facts before saying anything, but I would appreciate it if you would let me know how you go on. I've had a feeling, you know," I said reprovingly, " that you've not been above suspecting me of some complicity in this crime."

" Oh, come now, Mr. Foster ! " he said rising to his feet and laughing heartily. " You mustn't mind our little ways. It's a good system to work on, you know. Place an imaginary rope around all those within striking distance at the time of the murder and act as though each one is the guilty person until you've eliminated him by cold hard facts."

" So that none of us need feel secure until you've made an arrest ? " I asked jokingly.

" Everyone can feel secure whose conscience is clear," he replied pleasantly. " And I'm sure yours is, Mr. Foster."

And on this pleasant but far from satisfactory note we parted.

Knowing Sergeant Wrigley's ways I hurried out to the back of the house to make sure that Charlie had returned, for I did not want the sergeant to be questioning him regarding the night we met without Charlie's knowing the right answers to give. Charlie, however, had kept discreetly out of sight and when I located him in the back garden I explained to him swiftly what I had said, and then I added in a louder voice for Gell's benefit :

" You've done a smart piece of work this morning, Weekes. Sergeant Wrigley is at once following up your clue."

And shamelessly leaving poor Charlie to bear the full brunt of Mr. and Mrs. Gell's thirst for knowledge, and trusting to his native shrewdness to tell them enough and no more, I made my way round to Harriet's flat feeling that I had some really good news in readiness for her.

It was a fine, crisply sunny day, and I was in a mood to appreciate it. I felt as if a great weight had rolled off my mind and that I could face the world once more with nothing on my conscience but good resolutions for my future impeccable behaviour, particularly where meddling with evidence was concerned.

Harriet must have sensed from my expression that something had happened, for her own face lit up eagerly as I entered the flat and she asked, almost before I had taken my seat :

" What has happened, Henry ? "

" Oh, things are moving," I replied smiling at her, " and moving in quite a different direction. Sergeant Wrigley has gone to question Elaine Freer ; she was seen in the vicinity of your house on the night of the murder."

" Oh ! " Harriet commented, and her face went white. " I—I feel rather sorry for her," she murmured.

" People like her bring their troubles on themselves to a great extent, but I can't help feeling sorry for her just the same. If she didn't actually commit the crime, it might mean a lot of very nasty publicity for her."

" Anything is better than that you should hang for another person's crime," I said bluntly.

" Of course, if she is guilty," Harriet said doubtfully, " that alters the whole thing."

" And things seem to point that way," I commented, wondering a little at Harriet's attitude, but at the same time very pleased to think that she could be so charitably disposed to a person who had not troubled her head in any way about Harriet's feelings.

" It's queer, isn't it," Harriet went on speculatively, " how one hates the thought of capital punishment for others, and yet, you know, if it were I, I'd rather have a swift end than be cooped up for the rest of my life, wouldn't you ? "

I thought the matter over.

" I wouldn't like to have to decide," I answered at length. " Actually one's instinct is to cling to life even when there seems to be little or nothing to live for, and I think, so far as I personally am concerned, that were I being executed, I should live a whole long dragging lifetime of miserable suspense in the interval between the sentence being pronounced and carried out."

" Yes ! " Harriet agreed, " that must be the worst part about it, but even then I would prefer it, if I had been guilty of taking another's life. At least hanging gives one time to ask forgiveness from one's Maker. The murderer, on the other hand, hasn't given his victim a second in which to settle his account. That to me is the most dreadful part of the whole thing."

" If it comes to that," I said lightly, knowing and

understanding the trend of her thoughts, "we might as well admit that the person who is destined to be hanged is the only fortunate person in the world. He does know the day and the hour and can make his preparations accordingly, while the rest of the world is doomed to uncertainty ; perhaps a sudden unexpected death crossing the road, or a death a year after it has been prophesied by one's doctors. It seems grossly unfair that the murderer should be the one person with a reasonable hope of dying at peace with his Maker."

The complete absurdity of the reasoning at once amused Harriet and banished her gloomy thoughts.

"It's queer how completely one can get depressed by looking only at one facet of life or any particular thing," she mused, "and yet, if we can only see the thing as a whole and in true perspective, one is soothed rather than upset by the coherence and simplicity of everything."

It was at this point I enquired after Joyce who had not put in an appearance at all while we had been talking.

"She has gone out to make one or two purchases—in connection with the funeral," she added a little awkwardly.

"Oh, is it this afternoon?" I enquired, and sat for a moment a little amazed at myself. I had been so occupied with trying to puzzle out the mystery behind Cyril's murder that I had not given a thought to the fact that he would have to be decently buried. I ought to have offered to take all that worry off Harriet's shoulders.

"Hugh has been attending to the matter, fortunately," she added, as if reading my uncomfortable thoughts, "but I was wondering, Henry. What do I do? I mean . . ." she broke off and the colour flamed into her pale cheeks.

I knew what was in her mind. She had had no love for her husband, she had parted from him and in the minds of everybody was the feeling that she must have killed him. Would she look like a hypocrite by going to his funeral? On the other hand, she had been married to him for ten years.

“ ‘ It is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead . . . ’ ” I quoted at length, realising she wanted something really decisive to guide her. “ We shall go to the funeral, Harriet, and pray for the repose of his soul.”

“ Yes ! ” She nodded her dark head as though I had given her the answer she was hoping for. “ I had been thinking along those lines, Henry. The funeral is to be as quiet as possible and we are keeping the time and place a secret except for those who ought to be there. I was about to 'phone you and tell you the time of it when you called. It will be a bit of an ordeal, and there's no reason why you should go if you don't want to. I'm hoping the usual sensation-seekers won't get to know about it until afterwards.”

We went into details of time and place and arranged to make our separate ways to the chapel where the body was at present lying. Apparently the police had co-operated in arranging things so that there would be no inquisitive crowd and the funeral could take place quietly and decently. Or had Hugh Paisley been the motivating influence, I could not help wondering, for he had taken all the arrangements on his shoulders. To do him justice, he had come forward with this really practical help which I, as Cyril's cousin and nearest male relative, ought to have undertaken. Queer as it may sound, I had not given one thought to the burial of the murdered man. When I had last seen Cyril's body, it had been in the hands of the police doctor, police photographer, and the police were on guard in

the house until such a time as the body would be removed to the mortuary. Beyond that my thoughts had not travelled. It was as if Cyril's remains belonged to the police and were no longer any concern of anyone else.

I began to make some little faltering apology to Harriet along these lines, but she cut me short with an understanding gesture.

"It was better, as things are, for Hugh to attend to everything," she said simply. "Oh, and by the way, Henry, since you've mentioned Mrs. Freer, another thing has occurred to me which might be important. I suppose it slipped my mind because George Padmore was always telephoning, Henry . . ."

I sat up with a jerk. George Padmore! And perhaps with not such an air-tight alibi as he had pretended to have! Harriet went on when she saw my sharpened interest:

"It was a few minutes before Cyril and I had that last quarrel," she faltered uncomfortably over the words. "I didn't take much notice of what Cyril was saying, although I was in the room at the time, but he seemed unusually short with George and I think George must have been pressing for some sort of a meeting, for in the end Cyril said: 'Oh, all right! In about half-an-hour, then.'"

I felt somewhat like a puppy new to the hunt who could move from scent to scent with a fresh yelp of excitement and the feeling that here was something at last, even though it had felt exactly the same on quite a different scent a moment earlier.

"Was it a trunk call?" I asked, my excitement dying a little as this question occurred to me.

"No! I can say that with certainty," Harriet replied at once. "Our 'phone, as you know, is in a kind of recess in the hall which can be shut off for

private conversation, but we also have extensions in several of the rooms for more general calls. Ellen came into the room and said that Mr. Padmore wanted to speak to Cyril urgently, and I could see he was of two minds whether to tell her to say he was out or not. Ellen has always been told to say at once if it is a trunk call to save delay, and she most certainly would have done so when Cyril hesitated, even if she had forgotten in the first instance. I was rather surprised when he decided to speak on the 'phone in the room. Usually his conversations with George Padmore were not for my ears."

"You must get in touch with Inspector Caldwell at once, Harriet," I urged. "This may be a very important piece of information."

"On the other hand," she hesitated uneasily, "it was only a scrap of telephone conversation; they may not have been arranging a meeting. Cyril might have meant that he was leaving the house in half-an-hour."

"Let the police decide that," I urged, beginning to feel a little guilty on Elaine Freer's behalf. If it were George Padmore after all, then I'd feel rotten giving Mrs. Freer away like I had done.

"Perhaps it will be as well," she decided. "It's queer, Henry, have you noticed it? that when one is reading a book one takes what people say simply as evidence, but when one has something to say which might be useful to the police one simply feels like a mean little tell-tale out to save one's own skin."

"I know I felt like an excellent specimen of a worm when I told Wrigley about Mrs. Freer," I admitted. "But then, we are out to find a murderer, we're not sneaking on a neighbour who is using a garden-hose without a licence. We cannot really hurt anyone if we tell the truth so long as they are innocent, and they have already done the damage if they are guilty."

And in so saying I soothed myself and soothed her. Nobody really likes to feel that they are saving their own skin at the expense of someone else's.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I LEFT Harriet's flat as soon as she had decided to lay her bit of evidence before the inspector and let him decide whether it was worth anything or not. I had refrained from saying anything about what George Padmore had said to me. The police would know infinitely better than I how to check up on such things, and in any case he might tell them quite a different story. I began to feel that at least Harriet and I were out of the wood, and that the whole case would soon be cleared up nicely and tidily leaving no dark shadows behind, at least none which would touch us personally. My confidence in the Walrus and the Carpenter had grown to an enormous extent. I felt that we were fortunate locally in having two such men to ferret out evil-doers. Just give them a pointer in the right direction and all would be well. My own guilty secret seemed to be fading into safe obscurity. What I had done apparently no longer mattered towards the solution of the crime. For what seemed a lifetime I had been in dread of those two policemen, and now I looked on them as competent allies.

I arrived home in good time for lunch. I should have had time to change for the funeral before lunch, but I had not the courage. Mrs. Gell has an unerring eye for "mourning," and as funerals are her one luxury, she would naturally expect me to tell her the time and the place of such an important one. After

lunch, I could change and slip out unobserved while she and Gell were clearing up.

I felt very guilty at the thought of withholding such an important titbit from Mrs. Gell, and knew I should have to suffer for it, but I was prepared for that. The thought of playing up to Mrs. Gell in the light of Harriet's ordeal was objectionable to me.

Nevertheless, my conscience smote me, in the vacillating way it has, when Mrs. Gell served a really excellent lunch in comparative silence and in such good time that I was left with time and to spare to get ready for the funeral. I felt that I was being rather mean about keeping her in the dark. After all she asked little from life but a funeral now and again, but that other side of me, the one that so hated the thought of Harriet's being held up as a kind of peep-show, was firm about it, and in the end I stole from my own house in what Joyce might truly have described as a furtive manner, and hailed a passing taxi when I was out of sight of the house.

I was relieved to find that there was hardly anybody at the little chapel except those I had expected to be present, but by the time the actual burial was in progress I was surprised to find that quite a little knot of people had collected. I didn't raise my head to glance around at them until the coffin had been lowered into the grave and the last prayers said, and then, with a start of surprise, the first face my eyes rested on was the large, solemn, and pale one of Mrs. Gell who was decked in the deepest black from head to foot, looking as though she were the widow.

How she had got there, or how she had even known anything about it, was more than I could fathom. My eyes moved around the rest of the little throng, and except for perhaps two, I knew them all: Joyce with her arm linked in Harriet's. Near them stood a tall

man in a bowler hat and a long black coat whom I had first taken to be a plain-clothes policeman, and nearly smiled when I saw it was Hugh Paisley. What a difference clothes make ! He usually wears a soft grey trilby and a smart overcoat of grey tweed, and his suits are invariably in the lighter shades. As he stood square and solid and protectively close by Harriet's side, I could not help thinking what a good policeman he would have made from the appearance of solid strength which he radiated.

But I was very surprised to see Elaine Freer and George Padmore standing a little apart from the others and side by side as though, feeling uncertain of themselves, they had drawn together for moral support. Mrs. Freer looked very white and there were dark shadows under her eyes, but she was as smart as ever and held herself proudly erect. George Padmore simply looked uncomfortable. Death is usually a terrifying thing to a man of his nature, but I could well fancy his muttering to himself : " Must do the right thing by old Cyril ! "

I wasn't surprised to see Inspector Caldwell in plain clothes hovering in the background. If he and Wrigley had discussed which of them should put in an appearance, no doubt they had decided that Caldwell's was the more natural graveside manner. Well, he had five neat little oysters all ready for the pleasant walk and pleasant talk, I could not help thinking as we all moved slowly in the direction of the main drive where the cars were waiting. At least, everybody moved in a body with the exception of Mrs. Gell. After I had walked some distance I turned round to see why she did not come with us.

She was bending in what appeared a reverent attitude over the graveside, but, alas ! No last sad farewell was being taken ; no last look at the coffin, no parting

prayer to speed a soul on its way. One by one she was reading and fixing in her retentive memory the inscriptions on the various wreaths piled by the graveside.

As I turned back again, I noticed Hugh speak to Harriet ; I think he had been offering her a lift back in his car for she shook her head and nodded in the direction of her waiting taxi. No ordinary funeral cortege had been arranged since it was better to conduct such a funeral as secretly as possible, though I could see that some people must have got wind of it for on-lookers were beginning to arrive and when we saw a man with a camera emerge from a car, we all, as if by common consent, hurried without further word into our respective conveyances.

Whether Elaine Freer and George Padmore had arrived together, I could not say, but I could see them driving off ahead of my taxi in George's car. I felt that the whole story of the murder lay between those two, and as I was waiting for my taxi to start as soon as the gates were clear, the door opened and Inspector Caldwell popped his bowler-hatted head inside.

"Care to give me a lift, Mr. Foster?" he asked.

"Certainly!" I replied with more enthusiasm than I was feeling. I would have preferred to be left alone with my thoughts than to be thrown on the defensive like this.

The taxi moved forward and from then on it was the inspector who was running it, though I knew who would pay when it came to footing the bill. He picked up the speaking tube and directed the driver to keep the car in front in sight and to put him down when it stopped. I at once became more interested and was conscious of quite a big sense of relief. It seemed as if the focus had shifted completely. Like me, the inspector, too, must now be thinking that the solution to the crime lay somewhere between the two in the car

in front. No doubt Harriet had 'phoned the police-station before lunch with the information she had remembered.

"Oh, by the way," he said in his dry voice, with his cold eyes never leaving the road ahead where the tail of Padmore's car was just in sight, "would you mind if I had Weekes down at the station for questioning some time? The Freer woman denies absolutely that she was anywhere near the Loders' home that night, and Weekes, I'm afraid, isn't the kind of witness on whom we'd place the utmost reliance."

"I'm convinced he's reliable in this instance," I said warmly. "He hadn't the slightest knowledge of Mrs. Freer's existence. When I set him to watch in the Poplar Grove district he was simply looking for the woman he had seen hurrying so agitatedly away from the direction of the Loders' house on the evening of the 24th."

"Well, since you're so sure, it wouldn't hurt to question him. He seems to be an important witness."

"Oh, not so far as the case goes," I said hurriedly, my heart sinking as I realised that Charlie was becoming involved after all. "As a matter of fact, Inspector, I simply gave you a clue to follow up, that was all. I'm trying to help Weekes to go straight. He was loitering that evening hoping to touch someone for something. His description of the agitated woman reminded me of Mrs. Freer, but I wouldn't jump to any conclusions, as you see. Charlie Weekes picked her out from the different women who come and go in that district and Mrs. Freer isn't the only dark, pale-faced one, you know."

But Caldwell seemed more than prepared to be reasonable, which surprised me. He said there were only one or two little questions he wanted to put to Charlie and if I liked he would question him in my presence

and at my home. If one person said one thing and another the exact opposite it was necessary to try to find out where things had gone wrong.

The car ahead was now turning up Poplar Grove, so it was fairly obvious that Padmore was driving Mrs. Freer home. The inspector spoke through the speaking tube to the driver and alighted when the taxi pulled up.

"Thank you for the lift, Mr. Foster," he nodded, in something approaching a pleasant manner, and as I entered my own door a few minutes later, I could not help reflecting that after all things had a way of coming right.

I was both surprised and pleased to find Joyce waiting for me. She had obviously been preparing tea for the two of us.

"I knew you'd have to starve to-day with Gelly-Belly being at the funeral," she explained, "so I asked Aunt Harriet to drop me at the corner as we passed. After all, she's expecting a visit from her solicitor, so she wouldn't be wanting me under her feet for the next couple of hours."

"It's nice to have a cup of tea ready waiting, Joyce," I commented gratefully. "I must say I was very surprised to see Mrs. Gell there. I had purposely refrained from telling her the funeral was to-day. As a matter of fact I didn't know myself until just before lunch."

"We rather guessed that it hadn't occurred to you that one simply does not leave corpses lying about indefinitely," Joyce said cheerily, as she toasted herself and some scones in front of the bright fire. "Not that there was anything you could do, darling," she consoled me, "the police and Mr. Paisley between them seemed to settle the whole thing, and it was a relief to poor Aunt Harriet to get it settled so quickly and secretly. I think she had expected an awful ordeal, but it shows

" You forget Mrs. Gell," I reminded with a faint sigh into my easy chair. Joyce somehow made me feel old and wrapped-in-cotton-woolish. " How ever she found out that Cyril was being buried to-day, let alone the time and place, is beyond me. It is my solemn conviction that no funeral could take place locally without her presence."

" I remember somebody saying once that a funeral had been held up some years ago when Mrs. Gell was ill in bed with 'flu. And funnily enough she was better—at least well enough to turn out—by the time the postponed funeral actually took place."

" Then I suppose we're to be thankful that she turned up to-day," I replied, " but all the same that does not explain how she found out. I didn't at all like the thought of her ghouling round this particular funeral and I slipped out of the house unnoticed."

" Well, Guardy . . . as a matter of fact . . . " Joyce began, then her usual confidence returned. " You see, darling, I guessed you'd be torn between love and duty, and it is a shame to deprive Mrs. Gell of her few treats in life. She doesn't mean any harm, it's just the way she's made. So I thought I'd just drop a hint, you know. After all, Guardy, we've got to make allowances for one man's meat being another's poison, etc. We've all got our weaknesses, one way or another, and you like to be humoured in yours, don't you ? "

" I didn't know I had any weaknesses, at least none quite so glaring as Mrs. Gell's orgies of death and disaster," I retorted nettled.

" Oh, not that sort," Joyce replied hastily. " Yours are mostly nice, boy-scouty ones, but what I meant was that they're sometimes difficult to fit in with the daily scheme of things." .

It apparently occurred to her that she wasn't making the best of the conversation, so she finished buttering the scones, poured out the tea, beamed at me, and ended triumphantly :

" Anyway, you haven't got a lingering atmosphere to face. I couldn't bear the thought of what your future would be like if you kept Mrs. Gell in ignorance of her Event of Events. I bet in your heart you're relieved, Guardy. You're awfully brave in theory, you know, but you'd be having to face up to her this minute if little me, in the guise of your Guardian Angel hadn't stepped in. And I gave it as if the message was from you," she ended reproachfully as I still stood on my dignity. " I told her that it was so closely guarded a secret that no one was to know until the last moment but that you had given her Permission to be There."

" Oh, well, Joyce ! " I smiled forgiveness at her at last. " There's no harm done, and if it makes Mrs. Gell happy . . . "

" Well, blow me ! " she exploded. " No harm done ! That's all he can say when I've saved him from a fate worse than death ! "

She twinkled at me in the very infectious way she has, and I did then give in completely.

" I must admit, Joyce," I whispered, " that as I wasn't the real agent, it is a very big relief indeed. You know," I rushed on impulsively, " there are times when you are a real blessing. I don't know what I should have done without you these last few days."

Joyce coloured up with pleasure for I rarely say anything so personal to her.

" I'm glad I come in useful sometimes, Guardy," she replied, trying not to be solemn about it. " I don't want it to be one-sided, you know. You've been awfully good to me." Then, to break up the bouquet-handing

party, in which we never, as a rule, indulged, she dimpled suddenly and said.

“ And as a penance for her lapse, I wouldn’t mind betting that Mrs. Gell will do you a supper fit for a Condemned Cell to-night.”

And she did.

CHAPTER NINE

HARRIET rang me up later that evening and asked if I would care to go round the next day as she had several things she wanted to discuss with me as a result of Mr. Rourke’s visit—the latter being one of the partners in the firm of solicitors which had for many years acted as legal advisers to both Cyril’s and my side of the family.

I got up the following morning feeling on top of the world. I felt full of the joy of life and as fit as a fiddle. It isn’t a feeling I often have—as though something nice is about to happen—and it isn’t a feeling I trust very much, when I come to look back. I remember now that the last time I was conscious of such an exhilarating feeling for no obvious reason, I developed a very bad attack of ‘flu the following day.

But while the feeling lasted, it was good. I felt I hadn’t a care in the world. Cyril had been buried without any fuss, the hounds of the law were no longer sniffing round my heels, and I felt, in spite of my blunders, that at last I was sitting pretty—to borrow a useful phrase. The whole nasty business would soon be cleared up and life would sink back into normal once more.

When I arrived at Harriet’s flat I thought that she, too, looked slightly less strained than she had done of late. Joyce chatted away in her cheery manner for a

few minutes and then announced that she would seize the opportunity of going to the library to change her books.

Harriet referred to Mr. Rourke's visit almost as soon as Joyce was out of the door.

"I was very surprised by some disclosures he made, Henry," she said. "And it certainly opened my eyes a little as to why Cyril had been more than usually short-tempered these last few months." She paused a moment and added quietly: "Cyril was on the verge of bankruptcy."

I stared at her incredulously.

"I could hardly believe it myself at first," she continued. "Not that I knew much about his business affairs, but he had had several legacies and he was a director in two or three good concerns. From what Mr. Rourke was telling me, Cyril would have continued to be more than comfortably off if he hadn't been bitten so hard with the gambling bug. I knew he spent a lot on horse-racing, of course, but that was only a small percentage. What has eaten up the large sums is gambling on the Stock Exchange. Cyril seems to have been both unlucky and ill-advised."

"It seems hard to understand," I frowned. "Cyril hardly seemed the sort of person to lose his head over things like that. He was more the type to make money out of other people's weaknesses, not to have his own assets gobbled up."

"Things apparently had begun to improve a little latterly," Harriet explained. "Whether they would have continued so Mr. Rourke doesn't know. The only thing is that Cyril was able to produce large sums of money on three occasions to meet some pressing commitments. Mr. Rourke was of opinion that if he had steadied up then and been content to cut his losses, he might have pulled through. That has made me

wonder if that was why he was so obviously anxious to bring things to a head between us. He seemed anxious to put the house and furniture up for sale."

This was a new angle to me. All along I had taken it for granted that it had been Harriet who had decided to leave Cyril. I had known she was of a type to stick by a bargain, even a bad one, so Cyril had no doubt to make things particularly unpleasant to break up the marriage when it no longer suited him to keep up appearances.

"But you are all right, Harriet. You have money of your own, haven't you?"

"Yes!" she nodded. "I was, thank goodness, more or less independent. I had not intended to ask Cyril for a penny when we parted, but it had galled him terribly a few months ago when I had refused to allow him to re-invest my money for me. I'm extremely thankful now that I didn't," she added fervently, "or I should be in a pickle."

"If it hadn't been so obviously murder," I said thoughtfully, "there'd be a good case for suicide. Cyril wouldn't be one to face a reduction in circumstances calmly."

"All sorts of things seem to be coming to light," Harriet commented. "Naturally the money that was entailed and which reverts to you, is intact, and I expect Mr. Rourke will be seeing you about that. For some things I'm glad there's little or nothing to come when everything is settled. It solves a big problem. I could never have accepted a large sum of money, knowing as I did that if he had lived longer he would have willed as much as he could away from me."

"Apparently then, from a financial point of view, I am the chief gainer by Cyril's death," I said. "I hope this doesn't bring the police back on my trail with a rush when it all comes out."

"I'll tell them that I thought my husband was worth thousands more," Harriet smiled, "then they'll be torn between the two of us once again."

"Then you've been thinking the same as I, Harriet—that they felt they couldn't arrest the one without the other?"

"I couldn't help thinking from the way they questioned me, that they suspected it might be a put-up job between us, as though we had decided to act innocent and stand up for each other. I think there were too many coincidences for their entire satisfaction."

"Well, they've got other hares now," I reassured her.

"Or red herrings!" she answered with a faint smile. "I've got a feeling that we're not out of the wood yet."

"And I've been having such a care-free feeling of being completely out of it," I reproached her.

"Then let's hope you're right," she said lightly. "Somehow I hardly dare walk abroad until it is all settled. I know people think I did it, and they're wondering why the police haven't arrested me."

"Oh, if you start wondering what people are thinking, you won't get a minute's peace. I expect you'll get just as many thinking the opposite—that's usually how public opinion runs, for what it is worth. The main thing is to know that one is innocent."

"I can't help thinking they could make out a very damning case against me," Harriet murmured. She still tried to speak lightly as though making a joke of it, but I could see the worry of it was very active at the back of her mind.

"And so they could against me, and perhaps against Mrs. Freer and George Padmore when everything comes to light," I pointed out. "The mere fact that the police have taken no step so far is all in our favour. I'm sure we'll be spared any more unpleasantness, Harriet."

I felt genuinely confident and Harriet knew this and the knowledge cheered her immensely.

"By the way," I asked. "Have you been back to the house at all."

"No, oh, no!" she said swiftly. "Somehow I feel as though I never want to set eyes on the place again."

I could understand and sympathise with her point of view, but I persevered in what I had in mind.

"I'd rather like to go along some time, Harriet, if I may. I think the police are finished completely there now, and I thought that if you and Joyce came along we may have time to look round and perhaps find something which will help to get things settled more speedily. It would be useless for me to go alone as I couldn't say for certain whether anything was different from what it was normally. We might discover something, Harriet," I pleaded when she hesitated. "That other evening we were both too upset to think clearly and notice things particularly."

"If you think it will help, Henry," she replied at last very reluctantly.

"It won't hurt, at least, Harriet. I'd like to feel we'd done everything we could."

We were just about to fix a suitable time for the visit when the door bell rang and soon Ellen appeared with the announcement that Mr. Padmore wished to have a word with Harriet.

Harriet and I exchanged glances. It was a most unexpected visit and I'm sure I felt as guilty as Harriet knowing that I had encouraged her to put the police on his scent.

He came in looking, as usual, pale of face, flabby, slightly bulging eyes and with that fixed smile on his face which to-day, however, had something a little afraid in it.

He seemed a little taken aback to find me with

Harriet and he settled himself nervously on the edge of a chair and seemed at a loss what to say.

We spoke about the weather and when we had completely exhausted this topic, he burst out suddenly :

" Yes, I did ring up Cyril, Mrs. Loder, that night, but I was on my way out of town and I went straight on after I had spoken to him. It's going to be a deuce of a mess for me if all this comes out publicly."

" I'm sorry, Mr. Padmore," Harriet said uncomfortably, " but I had to mention to the police anything which happened immediately before the murder, and it was possible that you might have some light to throw on it."

" None at all," he spluttered, " absolutely none at all. If my wife gets to know about that night, she'll be finished . . ."

He broke off and an unaccustomed, though very faint, colour stained his flabby cheeks.

" Nothing need come to light that hasn't a direct bearing on the case. The main thing was that it occurred to me that you might have been making an appointment with my husband."

" In a way I was," he muttered. " Or rather, I was trying to find out whether he meant to stick to the foursome. We'd fixed it up a week ago before we had a bit of a bust-up. I meant to let him please himself whether he came or not, but Mrs. Freer asked me to find out if he meant to keep to the arrangement. She said he wouldn't turn up if he thought I was going to be awkward. So I 'phoned just to please her, and I damn well wish I hadn't."

He fixed his protruding eyes resentfully on Harriet and his expression seemed to say: " If you don't like what it all implies, well, you've brought it on yourself."

" Why did you tell me you were fifty miles away ? "

His head twitched nervously in my direction ; it was obvious he was very upset about something.

" Well, by the time the murder was committed I'd be nearly that distance away," he jerked defensively.

" Fifty miles in half-an-hour is good going," I commented drily, " and your 'phone call was just a local one."

" Well, I can prove that I proceeded northwards from that time. I had someone with me the whole of the time and I can prove it, but I don't want to—if it can be avoided. My wife read an ultimatum to me last time, and I've got to knuckle under a bit." He licked his pale, full lips and continued with the sullen explanation : " I had a lot of property made over to her a little while ago when things were a bit shaky and there's money in her name which is really mine, so she's got the whip-hand now and could walk out and leave me stranded."

This statement gave me immense satisfaction. I like to see clever men getting tied up in their own cleverness and I'd seen enough of prospective bankrupts salvaging what they could before the crash and having it put in their wife's name and be damned to the legitimate creditors, to make me pleased to see a hitch somewhere in this comfortable plan.

" But you didn't make an effort to find out why he hadn't turned up after all when he said he would be following on or meeting you in half-an-hour ? " I pointed out.

" Well, Elaine didn't follow on, either, so I thought that they'd decided to go off on their own and I wasn't bothered much as he'd been like a bear with a sore head lately. I'd done what I could, and that was that. It's the limit if one's going to have one's private affairs

bandied all over the town just for doing a kind action."

"I don't see why they need be broadcast," I said mildly. "Naturally the police will question anyone who had anything at all to do with a murdered man just before his death, but since your alibi is so watertight, it should end there so far as you are concerned."

"It needn't have been mentioned in the first place," he said nastily, rising to his feet, obviously in no better state of mind now that he had got this off his chest. "I don't hold with people going out of their way to make things as unpleasant as they can for others just because they're in a jam themselves."

"As Sergeant Wrigley pointed out, Padmore," I replied more calmly than I was feeling for I could have wrung his fat neck, "only those with uneasy consciences need to worry. And you can hardly blame others if yours isn't at ease, can you?"

And with that I hustled him out, wishing I had the physical strength to throw him out neck and crop, but it would have needed a fairly substantial crane for a job of that sort.

"He's got something on his mind," I said to Harriet when I returned.

She looked up with a faint smile.

"Perhaps nothing more than the money and property which he has made over to his wife," she commented. "If he's been losing money as heavily as Cyril, and it's likely seeing that they were so thick, it's not a very rosy prospect to think that he'll no longer be able to count on sharing his wife's comfortable income."

"It would do him good if that happened. I'd like to see him so fixed that he'd have to do a spot of real hard work to get his living. He does little more than live by his wits as things are . . ." I broke off with a mental injunction to myself not to let my dislike get the better of my sense of justice.

"If his story is true," Harriet said thoughtfully, "then things will look much worse for Mrs. Freer. It would seem that she was actually waiting for Cyril and when he didn't turn up she may have called. It looks very much like it from what Charlie Weekes said."

"The police will check up on it," I replied, relieved to think that it was so. I was more than glad now that Harriet had remembered that 'phone call. The more I saw of George Padmore the less I liked him, and the more one dislikes a person the more easily one can imagine them committing a crime.

I rose to go, as I wanted to go into Town to spend an hour or so at the office before lunch.

"Should we go round to 'The Cedars' about dusk to-night when there aren't likely to be many people about?" I asked, reverting to our former topic.

After a slight hesitation, Harriet agreed, and I arranged to call for her and Joyce after tea. In any case, even if we discovered nothing, the walk would do Harriet good, I decided. She stayed almost like a prisoner in her flat, hating to go out, shrinking from that local notoriety inseparable from her position.

There was so much work awaiting my personal attention when I arrived at the office that I 'phoned to Mrs. Gell to say I would not return before tea-time. I had a light lunch sent in to the office and I got so immersed in my work that life seemed to have assumed natural proportions again and the murder of Cyril Loder seemed to belong to some distant, almost forgotten, day.

I got the train back home with a bit of a scramble, but it was a fast train and I was home in half-an-hour, still with the feeling of everything being right and normal once more quite excluding the anxiety of the last few days.

But a good deal of my complacency vanished when

Mrs. Gell announced with immense satisfaction that Sergeant Wrigley had been round again and had asked to have a word with Charlie Weekes.

This gave me quite a turn, because the preceding evening Caldwell had questioned Charlie in my presence and everything had seemed straight and above-board. I sent for Charlie immediately and he came so quickly that I knew he had been bursting on the doorstep with his news.

"It fair gave me a turn, Guv'nor," he began hoarsely, obviously intent on coming to the point in his own way, "wot with you being out and all. I thought at first 'e wanted to catch me out, like. But he kept on and on about that there Mrs. Freer. The lady wot I saw yesterday, the same as I saw that night. 'E wanted to know exactly what she looked like, if she 'ad any luggage, if I saw a taxi going to the 'ouse, and if she seemed in a 'urry and upset like. 'E kept on and on about this that I began to think 'e was fooling me and meant to spring something on me to take me by surprise. But 'is mind was just on 'er and 'e said as 'ow I was to let 'im know if I saw 'er again and to let 'im know immediately. I think as 'ow she's done a bunk, Guv. I think the sergeant thinks she's done a bunk, too."

Charlie was full of it and very excited. He very naturally thought he had done a good deal towards tracking down the real criminal and keeping further unpleasantness from me and incidentally himself.

"It certainly will look bad for her if she has cleared out," I agreed. "We'll have to see. She was present at the funeral yesterday afternoon, that was after you had seen her, and she certainly seemed as composed as one would expect. Apparently the sergeant has it in mind that perhaps she got ready to clear out before then."

Still, Charlie's news puzzled me. After all, Inspector Caldwell had followed Padmore and Mrs. Freer. It seemed odd to think he should have questioned Charlie so closely about her.

There was nothing else he could tell me, so I dutifully enquired after his wife and told him he could finish for the day if he wished, and with a parting smile of encouragement assured him that the whole case looked like being cleared up any day now.

"Me luck's changed, Guv'nor," he assured me earnestly. "I'm 'oping I won't never look back."

Well, things were looking fairly rosy for everyone except poor Mrs. Freer, I thought, as I made my way a little later in the direction of Harriet's flat. I could not help meditating, as I went, on the way some people deliberately wreck their own lives. Surely she could never have hoped to get away with it, with the murder of Cyril, I mean. And how it was possible that Cyril could mean so much to any woman that she should endanger her own neck by shooting him, was more than I could imagine. Harriet had the excuse of youth and inexperience when she married him; Mrs. Freer was definitely a woman of the world and well able to stand on her own feet and strike her own bargains.

Harriet and Joyce were nearly ready to set out when I reached the flat and if Harriet found the prospective outing distasteful to say the least of it, the same could not be said for Joyce. For Harriet's sake she was trying not to bubble over with excitement. She was tired of sitting around, that was obvious, and was yearning for something active to do.

"I hope we find something which has been staring the police in the face and they didn't even notice it," she whispered to me when Harriet went to put on her hat and coat. "I've got a feeling that it's going to be very exciting, Guardy."

"I don't expect anything will have escaped the sharp eyes of our local police, Joyce. The best we can hope for is something which could only be noticed by anyone intimately concerned, otherwise I would not have urged Harriet to come."

"There's sure to be something. You disturbed the murderer before he had time to make sure everything was all right," she urged. "We might even find some clue amongst Uncle Cyril's private papers."

"If so," I pointed out, "the murderer is hardly likely to have let any time elapse without getting them back. Once the police had finished with the house, he'd be on the spot."

"Do you think he might be there to-night?" Joyce asked, going a little pale at the thought that it might not simply be a question of picking up the right clue.

"It's to be hoped not!" I replied quite alarmed at the thought. "A person who shoots once for a purpose would not hesitate to shoot again."

"We'll switch every light on when we get there and leave the curtains open," Joyce decided. "Then nobody will dare prowl. Have you noticed, Guardy," she asked, her spirits reviving, "that if you go to see a creepy play or film how the people will not stick together even though they know a maniac is in their midst? They grope about in the darkness touching dead faces and screaming and never doing the sensible thing, and then the heroine goes off to bed in a room full of secret panels, and it doesn't occur to her to ask one or two of her girl-friends to share her room, or even her lonely wing of the house. No! They have to go to some other part and she only hears their distant screams by way of a sedative."

"We'll switch every light on," I said firmly, "but as to leaving the curtains wide to give every passer-by a good view, I hardly think that would be sensible."

After all, Joyce, we are in the nature of being minor celebrities locally and we hardly want a crowd collecting, even if we should have the additional security of knowing they would shout out warnings if they saw the killer stalking us."

Joyce giggled.

"Like the kids do at the cinema?" she twinkled.

Harriet joined us at that moment and her rather sad expression lightened as she heard our laughter and caught sight of our expressions, so we all set out, after all, in quite a cheery mood.

It was just nicely dusk outside and Harriet took a deep breath of the night air.

"Fresh air is so lovely," she commented. "How hateful it must be to be a prisoner and have fresh air rationed."

"You and Joyce ought to take a train to-morrow to the coast or out into the country for a good day in the open," I suggested, hating to think that she stayed indoors because she disliked running the gauntlet of inquisitive acquaintances.

There was a short silence, then she said rather awkwardly.

"I promised Inspector Caldwell, Henry, that I would stay around so that he could contact me at short notice if there were any new developments."

"Oh, I see!" I commented lamely, but this was depressing news; it proved that police suspicions still rested very strongly in Harriet's direction.

"By the way, I hope you've got a key?" I asked as we walked briskly along.

"I hadn't, but I asked Sergeant Wrigley if I could have one. I told him I had not removed the last of my things, which I hadn't in all the worry of what happened just before I left."

"Was it possible that your revolver was in any of the

small cases you left behind ? ” I asked feeling suddenly excited at this possible solution.

“ I couldn’t say for certain, Henry, but I hardly think so,” Harriet decided after thinking the matter over. “ I feel sure I only packed brushes, combs, and other toilet accessories in the cases left behind, because those were the things I packed last of all and I had an idea I packed the revolver quite early on.”

This thought kept me occupied for the remainder of the way. There still was the mystery of that other revolver, and I felt nearly certain that there was another one, or else my memory for details was failing me. I was sure there could have been no notches on the revolver I had picked up. The sight of them would have brought back far too vivid memories for me to have ignored them.

“ Harriet,” I said in a low voice as we entered the gate of “ The Cedars.” “ I’ve been meaning to ask you ever since the inquest. Was it the same revolver that you have always had ? I mean, the one with the notches ? ”

“ Why, yes, Henry ! That’s why I identified it so quickly. If it hadn’t been for them I’d have had to look at the number ; it’s a fairly common type of revolver, you know.”

Well, perhaps I had been flustered at the time I picked it up, I thought with resignation. I must have been very flustered indeed for those notches to have registered nothing when they had been part of the happiest days of my life, but it was the only explanation, unless there had indeed been another revolver. Otherwise the whole thing didn’t make sense. I wondered if I dared ask Sergeant Wrigley where the revolver had been found.

I took the keys from Harriet and opened the front door and groped for the switch. I pressed it down all

right, but no light came. Joyce gave a faint gasp and a fainter giggle as if remembering our earlier conversation.

"I should think the police turned the light off at the meter before leaving," I decided. "I'll grope my way to the cupboard where the meters are, Harriet. You two stay right here until the lights are on again."

Unfortunately none of us had a torch, but I had a box of matches and this helped me to locate the meters.

But to my surprise neither the light nor the power was switched off at the main.

"The light must have fused," I called out to Harriet. "Are there any candles anywhere?"

"There may be some in the kitchen cupboard," she replied somewhat doubtfully, then added more hopefully: "What about trying the power? It's hardly likely that the power will have fused as well; it's a separate meter. We're on tariff and all the reading lamps are plugged in to the power, Henry. If you could grope your way into Cyril's study, there's a hand lamp on the desk just by the door. It will be the easiest to find."

I struck another match and located the study door which was closed. The match died out by the time I had opened the door, but I was on fairly familiar ground and I knew exactly how the desk was placed. I felt for it, located it at once, then groped round it for the lamp.

Then with a violent shock, as though an icy stream had poured suddenly down my spine, I recoiled and stiffened.

For my groping hand had touched a face, a still, cold face, with the coldness of death.

I stood for a moment numbed under this fresh shock, trying to fight down a slowly rising feeling of sheer

panic, an impulse to hurry quickly from the house and say nothing at all to anybody.

But as the first shock passed, I began to wonder if my senses had been playing tricks with me, if I had perhaps just touched a marble paper weight, or something which had found an echo in my subconscious mind of Joyce's joke about touching dead faces in the dark.

I produced my matchbox again and with a hand I tried vainly to keep steady I struck a match, half expecting the necessary reassurance.

The match lit up the area of desk for a flickering moment, but long enough. With a sick and hopeless feeling I stared down at the body of Elaine Freer, slumped in Cyril's chair with her dark head resting on the desk. There was no doubt at all about it ; she was dead and stone cold as though she had been dead some little time.

" Can't you find it, Henry ? " came Harriet's anxious voice. " Perhaps I'd better come. I know my way round easier."

" Oh, it's all right, Harriet ! " I called out quickly, wanting to spare her the bad shock I had received. " I think the lamp has been removed. I'll try the one in the lounge."

I groped my way hurriedly out of the study, struck a match in the hall and another inside the lounge and found, to the relief of my many apprehensions, that this room at least was without its face in the dark. I darted to the standard lamp and pressed the switch. To my immense relief the room was at once flooded with a soft light.

" It's all right ! Come in ! " I called, and crossed to the window and drew the heavy hangings.

Harriet entered first and immediately crossed the room and switched on the electric fire. She shivered

a little as she did so, and I knew the movement was not entirely one of cold.

"I'll investigate the fuse box, Harriet," I said, trying to speak in matter-of-fact tones. "If I take this hand lamp and plug it into the power plug in the hall, it will help. I've not many matches left."

"You look as white as a sheet, Guardy," Joyce said, her voice sounding strangely young and happy and carefree. "You aren't nervous, are you?"

"Terribly!" I tried to reply in a similarly light vein. "I've never tackled a fuse wire before and I'm afraid of letting myself down in front of you both."

"Oh, I know how to mend them," Joyce returned confidently. "Show me where the fuse box is and I'll do the rest."

"For the sake of the prestige of the superior male, Joyce, you should at least pretend ignorance of such mysteries, and greet me with a 'what-would-we-do-without-a-man-in-the-house' expression when I at length succeed in reinstating the lighting system."

"So long as you don't electrocute yourself, Guardy," she chirped as I made my dignified exit. "We don't want another . . ."

Happily she remembered herself in time, as she sometimes does. It apparently occurred to her that to finish the sentence would hardly be in the best of taste, to say the least of it. As I struggled with the fuse wire, trying to remember what it was that Gell had done on a similar occasion when our lights had failed, I realised that Joyce was only trying to keep us all cheery on our re-entry into a house of unhappy memories.

"Don't forget to switch the light off at the meter before you start messing about," Joyce called out an anxious, and fortunately timely warning.

I discovered two broken fuses and repaired them with

fresh wire by the simple method of copying exactly how the unbroken wires were fixed.

"Well, I think that should do the trick," I said to Joyce who was standing in the open doorway of the lounge.

"It will if you turn the mains on again," she said as I vainly pressed the hall switch.

I returned to the meter cupboard muttering inwardly that anybody would be likely to forget the most obvious things when their mind was harassed by the discovery of a dead body and did not know how to break the news.

"Now where do we begin?" Joyce asked eagerly when the hall was flooded with light.

I crossed to the lounge.

"I'm afraid we'll have to begin by ringing for the police," I said soberly. "Harriet!" I looked at her she looked at me and I saw her stiffen as if preparing to resist a blow.

"What is it, Henry?" she whispered. "Was . . . was there anything in the study?"

"Yes, Harriet. Mrs. Freer is there . . . at least her dead body is there."

"Oh!" The cry was from Joyce, Harriet didn't say a word, but sat as though she were going to faint, for her face went whiter than even its recent pallor, even to her lips, and she glanced at the light as though she thought it was failing.

"I'll get you both a drink," I said as Joyce too, sat weak, white, and wordless.

"No . . . no . . . !" With a big effort Harriet managed to pull herself together. "You get on to the police at once, Henry. Joyce and I will go into the kitchen to make some tea. It will be better to be doing something while we wait."

I preceded them into the kitchen. In my present state of mind I was ready for all kinds of unexpected

horrors, but the kitchen was reassuringly blue-and-white and empty.

"There'll be some canned milk, I expect, and there's plenty of tea and sugar," Harriet said, mechanically turning on the stove. "There are some cups and saucers in that right-hand cupboard, Joyce."

"I'd better rinse them," Joyce commented as she located them, and things seemed suddenly so commonplace that I switched on the light in the study to make sure I was not suffering from delusions. I hastily switched the light off again and dialled the police station, whose number I now knew by heart. The inspector was in the office, so I asked to speak to him personally.

In the middle of telling him about my discovery, I again had the strong impulse to go into the study to make sure that there was indeed a body there. The whole thing was so unreal. Why should Elaine Freer be lying dead in this house of all places?

"I'll be along at once, Mr. Foster," Inspector Caldwell said in his dry, matter-of-fact way which gave no clue to his feelings. "Don't touch anything at all, will you?"

There was no fear of that, I thought as I replaced the receiver. There could be nobody in the whole world less anxious to meddle in police business than I now was.

Joyce was very subdued as we carried the tea tray into the lounge and sat quietly sipping the refreshing drink. But either our combined silence got on her nerves, or the strong tea revived her, for suddenly she burst out:

"This has spoilt our clue-hunting evening, anyway. Why on earth should she have come here at all, Guardy, do you think?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied, "unless it

was to look for something she didn't want anybody else to find."

"Henry . . ." Harriet looked across at me with darkly troubled eyes. "Is it . . . suicide?"

I was taken aback for a moment.

"Suicide?" I repeated, mentally visualising that still figure. "Well, I couldn't say, Harriet. I took it for granted . . ." I half rose to my feet with the idea of having a closer look. The thought of suicide was definitely better and would probably mean a complete clearing-up of the crime.

But the door bell prevented me from going to the study again. I crossed the hall instead and let in Inspector Caldwell, Sergeant Wrigley, and P.C. Boon. I was very thankful I had nothing at all to conceal this time. My nerves were in no state to carry the added burden of fresh guilty secrets.

I led the way to the study and switched on the light. Somehow I did not mind looking at the dead woman now that the others were there. It did indeed look like suicide. There was a revolver on the floor beneath her limp right hand and a bullet-hole in her right temple.

Caldwell and Wrigley just circled round, touching nothing, but making a few notes and occasionally exchanging remarks.

"Looks as if she'd been burning something," Wrigley commented, pointing to the charred ashes in the grate.

"Leaves out of this book, I expect," Caldwell replied, pointing to a small open volume on the table which obviously had had some pages torn out for nothing now was left but diary pages free from writing.

Then I felt as if the chasm was yawning before me once more. For I could swear, from where I was

standing, that it was the very diary which I had taken from Cyril's pocket as I awaited the arrival of the police ; the very diary which had been so quickly retrieved.

I probably stood gaping foolishly at it from my stance near the door which I had taken up in the hope that I could see what went off without being too much in the way to be shooed off. That Elaine Freer should have brought the diary to this house with the object of burning some possibly incriminating pages, and then committing suicide, seemed absolutely absurd on the face of it.

I had hardly got over the shock of seeing the diary again, when the second blow fell.

" Look here, Wrigley ! " Caldwell ejaculated, pointing to the revolver which, from its position on the floor, looked as if it had slipped from the grasp of Elaine Freer's right hand which was hanging by her side.

I didn't manage to get a close view at first, but I could see that they were very excited about something. It wasn't until the front door bell rang, announcing the arrival of the doctor and the photographer, for whom they had no doubt been waiting, that I managed to get a fairly close look. Unfortunately my anxiety to find out what all the excitement was about got me in the way of Inspector Caldwell who rather testily suggested that I'd do better to be waiting with the ladies in the other room.

Anyway, I got my glimpse and it was quite sufficient to send me away walking like one in a trance.

For the sight of the revolver put the finishing touch to everything. I was asleep. I was dreaming. It must be so. Only in dreams did the things one had on one's mind come to life in such an amazing way and dog one's every step.

" What's the matter, Guardy ? " Joyce's voice cut

anxiously through my dazed wonderings. "You look like a sleep-walker."

"I've come to the conclusion that I am asleep," I replied and I must have spoken with rather pompous solemnity for the words had the effect of making Joyce laugh and she really had quite a struggle to fight down a real attack of giggles.

"Have another cup of tea, Henry," Harriet said. "If you can drink a cup of tea you'll know you're not dreaming."

I took the cup and my heart sank as I realised it had taste and smell. It couldn't be a dream. It was real and yet so unreal as to make one wonder if one were going mad.

"What's upset you, Henry?" Harriet asked anxiously.

"Well, not so much upset as . . . as . . . oh, it all seems so ridiculous!" I burst out. "It's the revolver, Harriet; the revolver in the other room which Mrs. Freer appears to have committed suicide with. It's the very same one—yours, Harriet, notches and all."

"Oh, but Henry!" she protested as though she thought I was letting my imagination run away with me. "At least we know that mine is at present in the hands of the police."

"It's got them all worked up, anyway," I explained. "I hadn't given the gun a glance. It was Caldwell who first noticed how exactly similar it was—at least that's the only reason he could have had for getting so excited."

"But surely it can't possibly be the same," Joyce cut in. "I mean, that would imply gross carelessness at the police station, wouldn't it?"

"All the same, I don't think Caldwell will rest until he has confirmed that the other is safely under lock and key."

And as if to confirm my words, we could hear the sound of the telephone being dialled in the hall.

"I wonder if we need stay any longer, Henry?" Harriet asked restively. "I wish we had never come . . ."

She broke off, remembering that it was I who had persuaded her.

"It's perhaps a good job we did, Harriet. The house might not have been entered for weeks otherwise."

"But perhaps we could go home now?" Joyce asked. "I mean, there's nothing to keep us; it's hopeless to think of carrying out our first idea."

"I don't see why we should hang around any longer," I agreed, and dutifully went to find Inspector Caldwell to ask if we could clock out. I was rapidly getting to that state of mind when I felt that anything I did would have to be with full police sanction.

Caldwell stroked his cadaverous jaw when I stood metaphorically cap in hand before him and made my humble request.

"I don't see why not!" he mused, "we're busy on routine at the moment and I can get to know all I want from you later on. By the way, what brought you here to-night? Might have been expecting something, eh?"

He tried to be jovial and succeeded in looking threatening.

"I accompanied Mrs. Loder and my ward, inspector. Mrs. Loder wished to bring some things away."

"M-m-m . . ." He continued to stare dissectingly at me, then shot out:

"And none of the lights would come on you said over the 'phone. How is it that they're all right now?"

"I mended two broken fuses," I was beginning proudly when he interrupted me with an impatient gesture.

"You should not have touched anything, Mr. Foster. But I presume that you mended the fuses before you discovered the body?"

In some confusion I had to confess that this was not so, and he looked at me as if he couldn't expect anything better anyway and with great patience asked me to show him which two fuses I repaired.

With some misgivings I pointed to the two fuses I thought were my handiwork. I was surprised to find that I could not be sure when I usually pride myself on my memory for details, but in this case I excused myself on the grounds of great mental stress. In any case, I wasn't going to admit to any more imperfections under the inspector's cold eye. I pointed out two fuses and I meant to stick to these like grim death.

After this the inspector gave us permission to leave, and it wasn't until we were well on our way home that it came to me with the effect of a cold douche that if the inspector did any experimenting with the lights and found that the two I had pointed out to him affected, say, only the upstairs lights, then I had made things awkward for myself again. After all, he had hardly wanted to know out of idle curiosity.

I must have sighed or something, for Harriet's hand rested for a moment on my arm as though she knew that I was feeling depressed.

"It'll be a good thing when it is all over, Henry," she said quietly. "Fortunately everything passes with time."

"Yes!" I agreed, squaring my shoulders suddenly and reminding myself that I was supposed to be Harriet's prop. "Possibly this will clear up the whole thing. It will have the advantage of sparing us all the ordeal of a murder trial."

Harriet drew her coat closer around her slim figure as though she were suddenly cold.

"Yes, but what a terrible end she provided for herself, Henry," she whispered, "what a lonely and terrible end, alone as she was in the house that . . ." she broke off, but forced herself to finish. "And to be in the dark! I'd have gone mad! She must have had nerves of iron."

Her halting words roused a fresh train of thought in my mind, one which had not occurred to me before. Would Elaine Freer have sat in the dark like that? Or had the shot somehow fused the lights? It didn't seem very likely that she burned those pages in the dark, or had she used the hand lamp and perhaps the lamp, burning for hours, had blown at length and perhaps caused the fuse . . . No! the lamp was connected with the power, not with the lighting system. Queer!

I began to wish more earnestly that I had given more careful thought to the inspector's question as to which of the fuse wires I had repaired.

I stayed only a short while at Harriet's flat before leaving for my own home, as I had told the inspector he would be able to contact me there within the half-hour.

I think Mrs. Gell had been having a bad attack of one of her "intuitions" for she was hovering around the hall as I entered and fussed around me as though she anticipated a rare titbit at any moment.

"The police are at 'The Cedars' again, Mrs. Gell," I commented, seeing no reason why the latest bit of news should be kept from her until she saw it for herself in the morning papers. "Mrs. Freer has committed suicide there, so this looks like being the end of the case."

I had some hope of being able to end the conversation there, but in this I was blinding myself to my past experience of Mrs. Gell.

"Suicide? Mrs. Freer?" she asked, savouring the

word slowly and trying to link it with the name. Then slowly and ponderously she shook her large head.

"Not on your life!" she said emphatically. "You don't get people like *'er* committing suicide. It's another murder like as not."

"Oh, I don't think so, Mrs. Gell," I replied, trying not to speak irritably at her thirst for the protraction of the drama. "Everything points to suicide."

"*You* may think so," she insisted with unflattering emphasis, "but I *know*. It's another murder. I always said there'd be two; murderers always strike twice. And now do you know what I'm going to say?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Mrs. Gell."

"Just this, and you mark my words: 'Never a two without a three,' that's what *I* say, Mr. Foster. 'Never a two without a three.'"

"And who do you think will be the next victim, Mrs. Gell?" I asked casually since she seemed to expect something from me.

"Well, now . . . it's 'ard to say, like, but unless you're the murderer yourself, Mr. Foster, I should say: 'watch out!'"

"Oh, come now, Mrs. Gell," I remonstrated. "You've been with me all these years and yet you can say 'unless you're the murderer!' Surely you haven't the slightest suspicion in that direction?"

"There's bin more unlikely ones than you, Mr. Foster, and I was only saying the other day to Gell that when the quiet ones do break out at last there's no stopping 'em."

"Then you must be feeling a little nervous, Mrs. Gell," I said rather testily. The theory that temperate living engendered a mass of repressions which eventually broke out in most virulent forms always irritated me.

But Mrs. Gell was not to be snubbed.

" Oh, no ! Leastways, not unless I took to spoiling your meals. A murderer likes 'is comfort same as anyone else."

And with this sublime confidence in her own immunity, Mrs. Gell turned to seek the more responsive society of her husband.

Mrs. Gell seemed to have got life weighed out to a nicety. Surely it was the height of civilisation to be able to contemplate with equanimity living under the same roof as a murderer and to know exactly how far one may go without fear of becoming the next victim ?

I gave up trying to solve the workings of Mrs. Gell's mind. After all, did it matter ? She and her husband gave me first-class service in their own way and they were entitled to their own opinions and to enjoying themselves in their own way, even if it were sometimes at my expense.

I settled down by the fire to think over the latest and what must surely be the final development. Elaine Freer with the police on her trail had killed herself. The diary had turned up again, its contents destroyed for ever. Then the gun—the mystery revolver—notched so exactly like Harriet's, was it the one I had picked up and sent away with Judy ?

Anyway, did it matter ? There would no doubt always be these questions unsolved so far as I was concerned, but so long as the case of Cyril's murder was settled in the main, the rest could take care of itself.

CHAPTER TEN

I WAS tired to death of the whole case. I felt I never wanted it mentioning again and when Inspector

Caldwell came round after dinner that evening I felt that he was simply being officious.

"I thought I had finished with police visits now that the solution of the case is so obvious," I could not help saying in what was no doubt an unfriendly manner as he entered with the air of having come for a nice, long chat.

"Well, I must admit we were looking at things a bit that way ourselves a couple of hours ago, Mr. Foster," he said drily, "but things aren't always what they seem, you know."

"You mean that simply because Mrs. Freer commits suicide it doesn't follow that she murdered Cyril Loder?" I asked.

"No! I mean that Mrs. Freer did not commit suicide. She was murdered!"

I stared at him. I could not find the strength to speak. I had a feeling that I had done my stretch at the treadmill and was being asked to do it all over again without any respite.

"It was meant to look like suicide, Mr. Foster, but unfortunately one or two little things went wrong—from the murderer's point of view, of course."

"But it must be suicide!" I cried at last. "It doesn't make sense otherwise. It means that we are where we were before only everything's much worse. It means that perhaps Mrs. Freer didn't murder Cyril Loder after all."

"Exactly!" nodded the inspector, looking at me as if he hoped I might say a lot more. But I didn't. I was thinking suddenly of Mrs. Gell and the immense satisfaction she would have at being right once more. How one dislikes people who are always right, and yet how easy it is to prove oneself nearly always right if one never aspires to anything else but a prophet of doom.

"How is it you are so sure it wasn't suicide?" I asked suddenly, clinging to any straw of hope. Life wasn't going to be worth the living if indeed this was another murder.

"I admit it looked like suicide at first," he replied, apparently quite willing to give me all the information I needed, "but the doctor had his doubts about the wound being self-inflicted—the shot entered the head in a downward direction, while with a self-inflicted wound an upward tendency would be expected. However, that would only have left us with vague doubts if it wasn't for the fact that Mrs. Freer didn't die from the bullet wound."

"Not die from the bullet wound?" I gaped. "But she was definitely shot through the head."

"It's doubtful whether the murderer knows what really did happen," the inspector said, looking at me with his cold eye, "but he must have clamped his hand over her mouth to prevent her screaming and kept it clamped there while he fixed the revolver to simulate a self-inflicted wound. But he was over-careful; she did in fact die of suffocation before she was actually shot."

"But . . . how horrible!" I gasped, appalled at the picture. "How terribly calculating and cold-blooded it all was if what you surmise is true."

"Oh, I don't think we're far out in our reconstruction," he replied with grim confidence. "We've not puzzled out yet why she should have gone there in the first place though."

"Could she have been taken there after . . . after the murder," I hesitated. It was hardly likely that she had gone there for the diary as it wouldn't have been there. Either she had had it all along, or the murderer had, and if Mrs. Freer had been the one who had something in it she wanted to hide, then surely the murderer

would have left the incriminating evidence for the police to find. Otherwise—if the diary contained nothing of interest to her—why did it figure in this particular episode at all?

“There’s that possibility,” the inspector agreed, “though we’re inclined to rule that out as being too risky. It’s no simple matter to carry a dead body about unaided and there was no point, so far as we can see, as to why she should specially have been taken there unless she happened to be there already.”

I began to relax a little under his willingness to discuss the case so openly with me as though he expected that I could give him some valuable help.

“By the way,” I asked, eager to get to know as much as I could while he was in this expansive mood. “I couldn’t help noticing the revolver. It seemed a replica of the one produced at the inquest. It seems queer that two revolvers should be notched in exactly the same places, doesn’t it?”

“There’s two of ’em right enough,” he nodded. “Funny that you should have had a feeling all along that there were two, Mr. Foster. Sergeant Wrigley was telling me how certain you were that it wasn’t Mrs. Loder’s gun that was used, but another.”

I don’t know whether my face changed colour or not, but my blood certainly felt as if it were trying to escape out of the top of my head at this direct onslaught.

“Well, my hunch wasn’t correct, was it, inspector? It was Mrs. Loder’s gun which fired the shot as events proved. I simply had the feeling that she was being framed, that was all.”

Which wasn’t a bad effort for me on the spur of the moment, I thought, and it must have satisfied the inspector for he showed no inclination to pursue the topic. Instead, he fished in his pocket and I was

innocently expecting him to produce his pipe, so I hospitably pushed my tobacco jar nearer to him.

But instead of his pipe he suddenly brandished into full view the old rexine shopping bag which had belonged to Charlie Weekes and which I had last seen in Judy's mouth carefully wrapped round a revolver.

"Is this any of your property, Mr. Foster?" he asked, displaying it in all its worn and faded glory.

To which question I was very thankful to be able to answer truthfully in the negative.

"Seen it before?" was his next and not so easy to parry onslaught.

I pretended to examine it.

"I doubt if Mrs. Gell has anything like it," I said dubiously. "She's rather particular about her shopping bags, and I usually let her have what she fancies in that line. The char up at the office has one rather similar, and I've seen a few about, but as to placing it exactly . . ."

I shook my head and regretfully handed it back to him.

He took the bag, folded it neatly and returned it to his pocket. I had disowned it for better or for worse. I could only hope fervently that it would never be traced to Charlie Weekes. Surely it would be impossible to trace the owner amongst the millions of similar bags in use in the East End of London?

"I didn't think it looked like anything from a house like this," he commented, "but I thought I'd ask since we found it with your dog."

I sat up then with a jerk.

"You've found Judy?" I gasped wondering why this fresh shock didn't make me break down and trot out the full story of my spineless efforts to be a major sleuth. "Is she alive?" I asked eagerly. It would

seem like the turning of the tide to have a nice piece of good news at long last.

“ I’m very sorry, Mr. Foster. The dog’s dead all right, has been dead for a few days, I should say.”

“ But where was she ? ” I asked anxiously, and even more anxiously my inner thoughts were questioning as to whether a revolver had been rolled up in the bag.

“ She was in the back garden of ‘ The Cedars,’ he replied. “ So she hadn’t gone far, had she ? But she wasn’t there the day after the first murder ; we’d had the grounds pretty thoroughly gone over. P.C. Boon came across her lying in a corner with some leaves scattered over her when he was looking round to-night to make sure nobody was lurking round. She’d been run over by the looks of her, and perhaps the bag was used to carry her in, though why anybody should have gone to all that trouble, and why she was put into that garden of all places . . . ”

He ended with a shrug and a rather significant :

“ It’s perhaps more than just a coincidence. In any case, the running down of a dog ought to be reported, so we’ll try it from that angle. You never know.”

I felt downcast at the thought of never seeing Judy again. I had nursed the lurking hope that one day she would turn up again, but at least I could console myself that she was not suffering unnecessary pain in unfriendly hands.

“ Oh, well,” I said, when I saw that he expected some comment, “ It’s ended that bit of suspense. Some people are very callous where animals are concerned.”

“ And some are callous where human beings are concerned,” he added, apparently apropos of nothing as he rose to take his departure.

A thought suddenly struck me, and I put it to him eagerly.

" You know Mrs. Loder quite well, of course, inspector. She's far from being a muscular type of woman so that the suffocation of a woman like Mrs. Freer would be physically beyond her, wouldn't it ? So surely that should rule her out so far as the first went ? I mean, one was apparently committed to cover the other."

" Yes ! " he nodded, as if he had already come to conclusions on this point. " We do seem to be whittling down our list of suspects. It would seem definitely to have been a man's handiwork. Well, good-night, Mr. Foster. I expect I'll be seeing you again soon."

Which wasn't a sentiment I could reciprocate with any cordiality, though I did my best. In view of his final remarks I couldn't help wondering uneasily if he intended turning up in the morning with a warrant in his pocket.

It was nine o'clock when the inspector left and I sat for a few moments giving way to that heavy depressed feeling one gets at night when one realises that there is nothing for it but to go to bed once more and try to sleep in spite of the heavy load of care which will fight to keep one awake.

For the sake of occupying my mind, I got out my outline of the case and glanced through it. My own list of suspects now included only Hugh Paisley and George Padmore. A poor list, and a not very convincing one but an improvement, I could not help thinking, on the inspector's which seemed now to centre solely on me. I had arrived at my suspects solely by eliminating from the sphere of suspicion all who had not attended each and every social function mentioned in the mystery diary. It depressed me still further to realise that perhaps the murderer was none of these, that perhaps he had not even been thought of by me. Not for the first time it occurred to me that the writer of the diary might not have included his own name.

Anyway, there were the names of George Padmore and Hugh Paisley for what they were worth, and it suddenly occurred to me that I had never found out whether Hugh had investigated the question as to whether his car had been borrowed on the night of the murder.

On an impulse I decided to go round to his flat. It would be a nice walk before retiring and I should be quite likely to find him in at such an hour.

I didn't manage to make the front door without being intercepted by Mrs. Gell who was secretly bursting to know why the inspector had called.

"I hope nothing more has Transpired," she said, shaking her big head and seizing a clothes-brush to brush an imaginary speck of dust off my coat and so delay me.

"They've found Judy, Mrs. Gell. She was dead in the back garden of 'The Cedars.' She'd been run over and dumped there. The police are trying to find out who was responsible. And you were right about Mrs. Freer, too. It was murder after all."

"Then you take care of yourself," she adjured me solemnly. "Mark my words: 'Never a two without a three.' If I was you, Mr. Foster, I wouldn't go out at this hour."

"I'm only going to call on a friend, Mrs. Gell. I expect I shall be back before ten."

And with that I made my escape. I believe that in the interval since I had last spoken to her, Mrs. Gell had definitely ruled me out as far as being the murderer went. Not that she would think me incapable of it. To her, anybody was capable of anything if they had the mind for it, particularly where dark deeds were concerned, but I think she fancied me in the rôle of Victim Number Three. This offered by far the better prospect for morbid excitement. With the murderer now

stalking me, for reasons best known to Mrs. Gell, they would be nicely on the jump ; they might even be able to rescue me in the Nick of Time, and so figure prominently in the next morning's edition of the paper.

When I arrived at the large block of expensive flats where Hugh Paisley lived, I decided to question the porter concerning the car and whether it had been in use on the night of the murder. I found him very willing to discuss the matter and, after listening to me, he said :

" Well, Mr. Paisley was questioning me on the self-same subject, sir. I often garage the cars for different people. I get to know who wants this doing and who doesn't. Regular fussy some people are, but Mr. Paisley he likes anything that saves himself trouble. 'Is car was parked in the circle at the front entrance, and so far as I know nobody had it out. Mr. Padmore has borrowed it once or twice, but he usually asks, and Mr. Paisley mentioned 'im particular when questioning me, but I 'adn't seen 'im about to remember. I put the cars away a bit later than usual as I'd been busy showing some people round one of the flats which was to let."

" Are there any other cars whose number begins with the letter ' L ' and ends with a ' 2 ' ? " I asked when I could get the question in.

" Why, yes ! " he replied so promptly that I knew he had been asked this before. " There is one other. When you come to think of it one in every ten cars would end with a ' 2 ' wouldn't it, sir. Mr. Paisley was saying that a car like his beginning and ending with the same number had run down a dog, so I said that that'd be poor evidence seeing as 'ow Mr. Selston's car was the same type and the number began and ended likewise."

After I had suitably rewarded his willingness to part with information I asked if Mr. Paisley was at home and a few seconds later I was ringing the bell of his flat wondering what excuse I could offer for calling at such an hour.

He seemed to have been taking things easy that evening, for he had on a very smart smoking jacket, a book in hand, and there was a table with a syphon and assorted drinks near the big armchair by the fire.

"Oh, come in, Foster," he said with faintly raised brows and a less faintly patronising tone of voice. "I wasn't expecting callers to-night. One has to ease off sometimes,"

"I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you," I said politely, "but I wondered if you'd heard the latest developments?"

"Have a drink? Developments about what?" he asked, pouring me out a drink without looking up to see whether I wanted one or not. "Sit down and make yourself at home."

"Harriet and I went round to 'The Cedars' to-night," I explained, keeping my eyes glued on him, hoping for some guilty reaction, such as a nervous start or the trembling of the hands which held the glasses, but my words affected him as much as they usually do, which is precisely in no way at all and as he made no comment, I continued:

"We found Mrs. Freer dead in the study!"

He did seem galvanised now. He looked at me as if he wasn't sure he was hearing aright.

"Mrs. Freer . . . dead . . . at 'The Cedars'? he asked incredulously.

"Not only dead, but she'd been murdered," I explained as he handed me a drink and took a deep pull at his.

"Murdered?" he asked, setting down his glass

carefully. "*Murdered!* Oh, come. Don't get murder on the brain."

"Inspector Caldwell says it is murder, anyway. I thought it looked like suicide, but I suppose they know."

"And you found her, eh?" He shot me a vaguely amused look. "You seem to be making a habit of being first on the scene at local murders. You'll have the police looking hopefully at you soon if they can't bag the real murderer."

"They've been looking more than hopefully at me for long enough," I said with some bitterness. "Personally, I'd been fairly sure that Mrs. Freer had shot Cyril. When I thought she had committed suicide I felt relieved to think that the case was nicely settled, but it is more complicated than ever now."

"I must admit I wondered about the Freer woman," he said, sitting down facing me. "But I wasn't sure; it didn't seem her way of going on somehow. But beyond her and Padmore with whom he'd quarrelled—they'd got each other into a big financial hole, I understand, I couldn't see any real reason for Cyril's being bumped off. Knowing Harriet as I do, *that* was always out of the question, though most people think otherwise."

"I wonder if the police have questioned Padmore closely?" I mused. "Not that I can imagine him as a killer, but because he knew more about Cyril Loder's comings and goings than anyone and surely he'd know who'd stand to gain by having Cyril out of the way."

Hugh Paisley looked at me with a not too friendly expression.

"You don't need to go to Padmore for that bit of information, Foster," he said pointedly. "But ruling you out of it, for the sake of argument, I should say

Padmore has got a good few things hidden under his hat."

I rose to go then, feeling annoyed, and no longer in a mood to talk things over with Hugh Paisley. The visit seemed to have been a complete failure so far as finding out anything was concerned. Apart from being quite unaware of any motive he might have had for killing Cyril Loder there was nothing at all to show that he might have been anywhere near the Loders' home at the time. From my conversation with the porter the latter had seemed quite convinced that Mr. Paisley had been in his flat or the restaurant most of the time. Naturally the police would have ways and means of checking up alibis to a fine point, but why should they check up on Hugh Paisley? There did not seem to be the remotest link between him and the murder of Cyril Loder.

Well, that left George Padmore, I thought, as I made my way homewards again. It was a depressing thought, I did not feel that Padmore had in him the makings of a slick murderer. A fresh name had appeared that evening, that of Mr. Selston. His might have been the car which had run down Judy that night. I made a weary mental note to try to find out whether Cyril had had any dealings with Mr. Selston, but I felt half-hearted about it. I felt half-hearted about everything. It was the reaction to having fancied that everything had been settled only to find that one had to begin all over again.

It was after ten when I returned home and the Gells seemed quite pleased to see me. The front door was bolted and barricaded as soon as I was inside.

"And nobody can open a ground-floor window without ringing a bell," Gell announced proudly. "It's me own invention and it works, see here . . ."

I had to follow him around the whole ground floor

having a demonstration of his burglar-proof invention.

"We'll be able to sleep peaceful in our beds to-night," Mrs. Gell said ponderously when the round was completed, which seemed a strange remark to give her satisfaction. I should have thought she would have preferred to carry her dark unease and suspicions to bed with her and yearn for a perpetual Castle of Udolpho existence. Apparently there was a Time and Place for Everything.

Knowing now that the chink in her armour was the Terror that Flies by Night, I managed to get a little of my own back.

"It's to be hoped that the bells don't start ringing in the Dead of Night, Mrs. Gell," I said solemnly.

"My laws!" she gasped, and her three chins quivered quite apprehensively.

"Perhaps it would be as well, Gell, if you removed the bells after all," I suggested. "It would upset Mrs. Gell if they went in the night. If I'm to be murdered, I'd rather it were done quietly."

Gell looked at me rather hard, but Mrs. Gell protested that they would rather Do Something about it, so we left the fanfare in full working order to announce the arrival of the killer.

At all events, we were not disturbed; the bells did not ring, so presumably no attempt was made on my life. I could not help wondering though, if Joyce had still been under the same roof, whether the bells might not have peeled forth an eerie warning. Or even had I been a few years younger, or less harassed by the unfortunate sequence of events, would I have given way to the temptation to sound the alarm and see how the Gells shaped up to it.

But I felt far too old and police-hunted that night to give way to frivolity. I crawled wearily into bed and lay awake for hours mentally preparing the answers

to the leading questions I should have to answer when I was on trial for my life. It is rather a weakness of mine this getting the answers ready for every possible and impossible question in a crisis. I suppose it has its roots in my being so slow to produce the right answer at the right time. I might just as well have gone to sleep because I knew from long experience that I never got a chance of using the answers I had prepared, or else I got so flustered I forgot them. But I suppose I got some morbid satisfaction out of wanting to cut a fairly sensible and intelligent figure in the dock. However, as there seemed to be no sensible reason for some of the silly things I had done, I fell asleep at length feeling that I should make an excellent Aunt Sally for any Counsel for the Prosecution.

The first thing I resolved upon next morning was a visit to George Padmore. I made up my mind to call on him immediately after breakfast and keep on at him until I got something really tangible out of him. After all, he knew Cyril better than anybody and with perseverance and my thickest skin I might ruffle him into giving something important away. The whole position was getting pretty desperate from my point of view. Indeed as time passed I began to wonder why I was not arrested ; so far as I could see it, I was the only real suspect they had. I had gained financially from Cyril's death. The police knew that I had been in love with Harriet when Cyril took her from me and no doubt plenty of people had told them that there was no love lost between Cyril and me. They probably suspected that I had been on the scene and overheard that last violent row between husband and wife. It was a fact that I had departed a little from my usually strict routine that night to call in the house, but then the police knew nothing of the stolen silver. It is hardly likely that they would believe me now if I attempted to

tell them the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And Caldwell himself had admitted that Mrs. Freer's death was not the handiwork of a woman of Harriet's build.

So what were they waiting for? What was the doubt in their minds? That there was some doubt was consoling, but it might be caused only by an excess of zeal in wishing to get the whole thing water-tight. Now that there had been another murder, they might act more quickly, so I must act quickly too. I had a most unreasonable feeling that once I was arrested, I was as good as hanged and that my own mouth would be my biggest enemy when it came to the cross-examination.

With all my heart and soul I wished that I had not interfered with anything. Just that little bit of guilt, knowing that I had tampered with things and made them different from how the murderer had left them, had made all the difference so far as my outlook on the crime was concerned. If only I had a completely open mind on the subject I should not now be wondering nervously whether I was going to be arrested or not. My conscience was just sufficiently weighted as to make it quite understandable to me that the police would have me labelled as Suspect No. 1.

Therefore I wasted no time after breakfast. I hoped to catch George Padmore finishing his. I hoped with all my heart that this one last effort at investigation on my part was going to lead me somewhere.

The thought occurred to me that we all lived within fairly easy reach of one another, with the Lodgers' house almost as the central pivot, so that we had all been fairly equally well placed for getting to 'The Cedars' in divers but equally convenient ways. The Padmores' home was similar to the majority in that residential dormitory of London. It had probably cost about three thousand pounds and they kept up appearances

with their neighbours by having a suitable number of maids and a gardener, and generally lived on so much expense as to make life completely miserable for them if the husband's income dropped a little from one reason or another, which frequently happened. I could well imagine that George Padmore had been having a sticky time of it lately if his losses had been half as heavy as Cyril's.

The garden did not seem as trim as one usually expects in these parts as I approached the front door, and to my surprise it was Mrs. Padmore herself who opened the door to me.

"Oh, come in," she said uncertainly, vaguely recognising me. "If you've come to see George, I'm afraid . . ."

"I particularly wish to see him," I said firmly as I stepped into the hall. "It is a matter of the greatest urgency."

She led me into a well-furnished but untidy room, and we sat down facing each other. I could see she looked anxious, almost apprehensive. She seemed a fairly decent type of woman, almost the motherly type. I've often remarked that men lacking in moral stamina will be very particular in the choice of their wives.

"What was it you wanted?" she asked, coming straight to the point.

"To see your husband on urgent business," I said firmly.

"I'm afraid you can't—he went away last night. At this moment I haven't the slightest idea where he is."

This was entirely unexpected and I think I must have stared unbelievably at her, for she suddenly burst into tears and between her sobs told me that she had had a row with George last night, that he had been in an awful state about something and had said he wanted

a hundred pounds and was going to clear out until something or other blew over.

"Of course I hadn't a hundred pounds, Mr. er—er—Foster," she added, as I supplied the name, "but he seemed in such a panic that I gave him what bit of ready money I had and made him out a cheque for one hundred pounds. Then this morning . . ." she gulped, and took a breath and proceeded, obviously not reluctant to unload her cares into a willing ear, "this morning he rang through to say that he had altered the cheque to nine hundred and that if I queried it in any way there'd be such a scandal as would cause me the loss of the house and everything. He said the best thing I could do was to sell up and get a little cottage somewhere."

"But didn't he give any reason at all for leaving so hurriedly?" I asked patiently.

She shook her greying head and mopped her red eyes.

"Somebody rang up just about ten last night and that seemed to finish him," she explained. "He looked as though he'd had an awful shock, and he started getting his things together straight away and I just don't know what to think. I know he was terribly put about when the police questioned him about Cyril Loder's death. They'd been bosom friends, and he was upset enough without that. I can't help wondering . . . Oh, but I don't know what to think . . ." she ended, and then looked at me intently.

"Well, if he isn't here," I said with resignation, "there's no point in my staying, but if you do hear from him again, tell him, will you, that I would like a chance of speaking to him privately."

"You couldn't tell me what it was?" she asked eagerly. "Perhaps I may be able to help."

"No, I don't think so. Oh, wait a minute," I added when I saw she was disappointed about having let her

cat out of the bag without finding out about mine first, "I particularly wanted to know whether Mr. Elston is a friend of your husband's, and, incidentally, whether he was a friend of Mr. Loder's."

"Elston?" she repeated doubtfully. "I believe we have had an Elston here once or twice to a bridge party or something like that. Yes, I remember him, but I should hardly say they were friendly; just a casual business acquaintance roped in occasionally to make up a hand at bridge."

That was all the information she could give me regarding Mr. Elston, so I tried one last parting question about her husband.

"I suppose he intends to come back sometime?" I asked as I rose to go. "You weren't parting, or anything like that?"

"Oh, no! We've had many a difference, but I've sort of stuck to him, and goodness knows what would become of him if he didn't have me to turn to. It's just that something's frightened him badly and he wants to lie low for a bit. I think somebody must have been threatening him. I do hope he hasn't been up to any real mischief. Anyway, he'll have enough to live comfortably for quite a while yet."

I took leave of her then with a renewed appeal to her to let me know as soon as she heard from him, and retraced my steps not knowing whether I could count the visit as having been fruitful or not.

A man ran away when he was afraid. The question was, of what was George Padmore afraid? Had he heard that Elaine Freer had been murdered, and was he afraid of a like fate since he had been so recently in her company, or was he the murderer and had he panicked when he had heard that the police had discovered that her death was not suicide?

These were questions that George Padmore alone

One thing I felt distinctly anxious about. I did not want George Padmore to be another mysterious victim. I could not help remembering uneasily Mrs. Gell's sinister warning, and I made the mental resolution that whoever else discovered George Padmore's body, I wasn't going to. I was tired of being first on the scene ; tired of summoning the police ; tired of being questioned as to exactly how and why I should have been on that particular spot at that particular time.

For the first time I began to feel quite pleased at the thought of Gell's burglar alarm. At least nobody could do it on me by surreptitiously stuffing George's body through one of the downstairs windows, and he was hardly the sort of proposition one would contemplate hauling up a ladder. He must weigh between sixteen and seventeen stone alive, I wasn't sure what his dead weight would be.

When I arrived home and discovered that I had spent the major part of my walk back trying to calculate George Padmore's dead weight, I began to wonder uneasily whether I were going out of my mind. The alarming thought even struck me that perhaps I had begun to suffer from mental aberrations and that it was really I who had shot Cyril and later smothered Mrs. Freer. It really seemed rather a coincidence on the face of it. I could think of many a suppressed desire where Cyril had been concerned, but at least not on Mrs. Freer's behalf. On the contrary I had passionately wished for her to stay alive and be Suspect Number One. But what about the advantage of killing her and making it look like suicide because she

knew the game was up ? The little devil inside me went on tormenting me and I was really glad to see Joyce waiting for me. A breath of her sane common sense was what I needed.

" Oh, Guardy ! I've been waiting simply ages. I wondered what on earth had happened," she greeted me, obviously relieved to see me. " Mrs. Gell was convinced that you'd been lured out and Done Away With."

" I forgot to hang one of Gell's bells around my neck when I went out," I smiled, " so perhaps they didn't hear me go."

" I've been inspecting the Murder Alarm," she dimpled suddenly. " I think it's priceless. Poor Mrs. Gell would pass out if it really did go booming into the night. It would make a most unearthly din, Guardy."

" I don't like the idea of it much myself," I admitted. " But it seems to afford Gell some satisfaction. Come into the drawing-room, Joyce, you look cold, and tell me what's troubling you."

" We had a visit from Sergeant Wrigley last night after supper," Joyce said, coming to the point as soon as we had seated ourselves. " And really, Guardy, I could not help getting the impression that he thought you had wangled us all to go to ' The Cedars ' so that the body could be discovered. He was very insistent to know exactly who suggested the outing, and why. He soon wore down Aunt Harriet's excuse that she wanted to fetch some things. He wasn't horrid ; in fact he was quite nice ; he sort of got us to say things before we realised what he was driving at."

" There's something about Wrigley that makes one yearn to confide everything in him," I soothed her. " He's got such a pleasant, innocent manner. One would never suspect that his job was the tracking down

of criminals were it not for his uniform. I guess he could get a job at any store as Father Christmas."

"Well, we told him straight that we thought if we had a good look round we might notice, or at least, Aunt Harriet might, something that was different, something that would give us a clue as to why the murder was committed. After all, it was Aunt Harriet's house; there was no reason at all why we shouldn't go there sleuthing all the time if we felt like it."

"And then of course," I cut in, "he would want to know why I chose that particular evening and why evening and why not broad daylight, eh? And while he was filleting you for information, Caldwell was doing his famous gimlet act on me, so I expect they've put their heads together and compared our respective answers."

"Oh, Guardy!" Joyce said anxiously. "I do hope you told the truth."

"Our reasons for going were quite open and above-board," I pointed out, "there was nothing to hide. I don't think I exactly said that I went sleuthing, but there was no reason at all why I shouldn't go since I was with the owner of the house. Oh, and by the way, did Wrigley tell you that Judy's body had been found?"

"Yes! And isn't it strange that she should have been hidden in a corner of 'The Cedars' garden? I mean, it does seem to imply beyond a shadow of doubt that Judy's death was a direct connection with the murder, doesn't it? Don't you think, Guardy, that it would be a good thing to tell the inspector about giving Judy that gun? I know it will sound awful, but it will prove something on your behalf. You can't drive a car, and if Judy was knocked down by somebody who wanted to get possession of the gun, then it wasn't you, see?"

"I expect it would simply sound like a fine cock-and-bull story which I had invented to turn Judy's accident advantageously to myself. Even if they did partly believe me it would probably only strengthen their conviction that I am the murderer, otherwise why should I have tried to hide the weapon in the first place, or say I had hidden it, when all the time they know that they found the first weapon used to murder Cyril and the other weapon, which only I seem to have known about, turned up in the murder of Mrs. Freer."

"If you ask me anything," Joyce said critically, "you want them to arrest you and don't intend putting up a fight."

"They haven't arrested me yet," I reminded her, "and I don't want to invite them to by having heart-to-heart talks with them about hiding revolvers and things."

"Oh, well," she shrugged, "there's always the hope that the real criminal will come forward, I suppose. But it's rather a forlorn hope if it is your only one, Guardy."

"I've great faith in Caldwell and Wrigley," I assured her. "They're not the type to do anything stupid."

"But the papers are already clamouring, and you know what happens when the newspapers start bawling for blood; the police have to arrest the first likely person to satisfy the sensational reader's misguided sense of justice."

"Well, in between now and the time it would take to stage a trial they're sure to find somebody else," I encouraged her, but her spirits were low this morning, and she seemed to be turning over the sum total of all our misfortunes in her mind for she suddenly said:

"And now Ellen's deserting Aunt Harriet. I did think that girl was loyal and would stick to her. I suppose she's been swayed by the common opinion."

"Ellen?" I said in surprise. "Indeed I shouldn't have thought she would leave. She was devoted to Harriet in her own way."

"Of course, she didn't give the murder as her reason, naturally," Joyce explained. "She said that she had the chance of a really good job in Town as a receptionist to a doctor and her people were anxious for her to take it."

"Well, she must have wanted to leave, or she wouldn't have applied for it," I said testily, annoyed to think of Ellen's desertion.

"She says that she didn't apply for it, that somebody had recommended her," Joyce explained. "Of course, she was perhaps just trying to make things nice for Aunt Harriet. Perhaps her people have put their foot down thinking that her present employment will be a bad reference. She must have got her recommend from somewhere else, anyway, because she's not asked Aunt Harriet for one."

"Oh, well, Harriet is well rid of anybody who doesn't want to stay. When does she go?"

"To-day. It's a good job we can have service at the flat if we want in a modest sort of way. Nothing like the palatial service flats near-millionaires like Mr. Paisley inhabit, but enough for not altogether helpless females."

"I'm glad you offered to stay with Harriet, Joyce, she'll feel a lot better about things with you there."

"She's not worrying about herself, Guardy, it's you she's worried about. She looked really ill after Sergeant Wrigley had gone last night."

"Tell her there's no need at all to worry," I said with a confidence I was in no way feeling. "Tell her that George Padmore has cleared out and that it is my opinion that if he isn't the murderer he has a good idea who the murderer is and is afraid for his own skin."

Joyce brightened up visibly at this news.

"Then why didn't you tell me at first?" she said in exasperation. "I've been worrying myself sick."

"There is, of course, the possibility that he has cleared out for reasons totally unconnected with the murder. He may not be able to meet his commitments, or something like that."

"Oh, it's the murder right enough," Joyce said her buoyancy returning. "I must say it's a great relief to have some other name to think of besides yours. It was like all hope going when Wrigley said Mrs. Freer's death was murder and not suicide. And Mrs. Freer was last seen in Mr. Padmore's company, wasn't she?"

Joyce now prattled happily on. George Padmore was the murderer right enough, and he was on the run once he had been warned that the police had discovered Mrs. Freer's death wasn't suicide. I made no attempt to check her, for I wanted her to go back to Harriet full of the same optimism.

"Well, I'll get back to Aunt Harriet, now," she chirped finally. "This will buck her up no end. Take care of yourself, Guardy. Don't let Mrs. Gell's forebodings come true. Drop in to-night for an hour, if you can. There's sure to be more developments before then at the rate things are going, and it's grand to talk everything over when no one personally is concerned, isn't it?"

I think she must have conveyed some of her optimism to me, for after she had gone I rang up Inspector Caldwell and asked him if he knew that George Padmore had cleared out.

"Why, yes! As it happens we do, Mr. Foster," came the dry reply from the other end. "He seemed very anxious that we should make it known that he does not know who killed Cyril Loder. He says Mrs.

Freer knew, or suspected, and wanted to confide in him and ask his advice, but he stopped her. He did not want to be mixed up in it in any way, so naturally when he heard she had been murdered he was afraid the murderer might think she had confided in him."

"Doesn't that sound a bit tall?" I asked sceptically.

"At least he seems genuinely of the opinion that his life's in danger," the inspector retorted. "And there is no other reason why he should have got panicky. His alibi for the time of the murder, if not exactly creditable, is at least water-tight. Oh, by the way, we heard that you called at his house this morning. Were you anxious to locate him, Mr. Foster?"

"Yes . . . er . . . no," I faltered, realising only too well the point behind this question. "I wanted to have a talk with him about Cyril and his friends. After all, nobody knew as much about my cousin as George Padmore did, and it is going to be a nuisance if he isn't on hand to give any information we might need."

"Anything you would like to know, Mr. Foster, you can get to know through us. Mr. Padmore has promised to keep in touch with us."

I thanked him and rang off. My last little straw had vanished and it galled me to think that a man like George Padmore, capable of any sort of sharp practice, could shelter under the protecting wing of the law, while I, who had honestly tried to do my best all my life, should be an Ishmael.

I caught sight of myself in the mirror and anything less like an Ishmael it would be hard to imagine. Most men are at their best and most virile in the late thirties as I was, but my reflection showed me something more like a cartoon of a worn-out taxpayer than anything else.

"And you fancied yourself as an amateur sleuth!"

I jibed at my craven reflection. "A policeman in mufti!"

I turned in disgust from the sight of the would-be hero and sat down to do some solid thinking. And something must have rung a bell in my mind for my thoughts were suddenly concentrated on Ellen Fisher, Harriet's maid, and once my thoughts were on her I began to pick up a new thread, a thread that grew stronger and stronger the more I investigated it, and in mounting excitement I rang up Harriet and asked her not to let Ellen leave until I had spoken to her on an important matter.

"I'm sorry, Henry; she's gone!" Harriet replied. "She left only a few minutes ago to catch the 12.5."

I thanked her and rang off saying hurriedly that I would try to catch her at the station. I hadn't much time and I finished buttoning my coat and gloves as I hurried along. Of course, there was no taxi in sight so I hurried as quickly as I could in the direction of the station. I knew I could just make it and since I had a season ticket I would not be delayed in the Booking Hall.

It was just three minutes past when I arrived somewhat breathlessly at the station entrance and I was about to pass through the barrier when I was stopped by a policeman I recognised as P.C. Boon.

"Sorry, sir," he said, "but the inspector's rather anxious to see you at the station."

"It will have to do when I come back," I said impatiently. "It is most important that I should catch this train."

"Sorry, sir. My instructions are definite," he said rather sheepishly. "I think there's a warrant," he finished rather vaguely in an undertone more to give me a hint to come quietly, I suppose.

I fretted and fumed. Now that I felt I was on the

real scent at last, my chance of following it up had gone.

“Guardy!”

I turned with immense relief at the sound of Joyce's breathless voice. She had dressed in a hurry and was still holding her coat and hat in place with both hands as she came flushed and panting up.

“Joyce!” I said swiftly. “Get on this train. I'm being detained, but I shall try to follow later. Don't let Ellen out of your sight. Follow her but don't let her see she is being followed and wherever she goes you must go and the minute you see where she is making for, let the police have the address and, if you can get them to do it, get a policeman to follow her into whatever house she enters. It's a matter of life and death Joyce, and I'll take all responsibility,” I urged, almost pushing her through the barrier. She seemed to grasp my jumbled instructions and sped off looking as if she were enjoying herself.

There was a taxi at the station so it did not take me and my escort long to get to the police station once more.

“You mustn't arrest me yet, Inspector,” I said, pretending I thought it a joke. “At least not if you want to prevent murder Number Three. I've just thought of something. I believe Ellen Fisher has some important evidence and it seems to me that she is being lured away to London. She is certainly not the type to make a receptionist to a doctor; she's far too emotional and certainly not educated enough . . .”

Briefly I explained her sudden decision to leave and the explanation she had given.

“And if you could 'phone through to the terminus,” I pressed, “and see that my Ward has what help she needs and if we can get hold of the address she follows her to, I think we'll find out something important.

Can you get your car out, Inspector ? It's not one of the fastest trains, so we won't be far behind it and as we go I shall tell you just why the murderer thinks Ellen Fisher is a potential menace to his security."

I thanked my stars that I was not dealing with a dunderhead, such as one sometimes reads about, and which probably do not exist outside the police force of fiction. Inspector Caldwell was a man ready to do the best by his job and he had sense enough to realise that at least he'd have me under his nose all the time and there might possibly be something behind all the fuss I was making.

He occupied only a few seconds of time on the 'phone, and much quicker than I could reasonably have hoped for, we were speeding London-wards in the wake of the 12.5.

I had at last found a thread leading to Hugh Paisley, or so I thought, and for good or ill I had named him to the inspector and now had to prove the strength of my thread.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"AND now," Inspector Caldwell said as he settled himself on the back seat of the car by my side, while one of his juniors drove, "I'm hoping that you're not jumping to wild conclusions."

"What I want to know," I replied, secure in a new-found confidence in myself, "is, did you, or rather, did Sergeant Wrigley send round to Mrs. Loder's flat to question the maid Ellen Fisher while Mrs. Loder and I were detained at 'The Cedars' just after I had discovered Cyril Loder's body ?"

"No !" he replied, as I guessed he would, "I myself

questioned the maid when I went round to see Mrs. Loder the morning after the murder."

"Then that's the solution to the whole thing!" I pointed out triumphantly. "The murderer was after Mrs. Loder's revolver. He wanted to have her as the likely suspect since, owing to being interrupted before he could leave things how he had planned, he had to make sure of his own security. When we question Ellen I'm sure we'll find that she found the plain-clothes policeman already in the flat. That she didn't let him in. He had been hoping to locate the revolver and get away with it unseen. When Ellen saw him, perhaps just as he was leaving with the revolver in his possession, he told her about the murder and that would be sufficient to put the girl in a fluster and not think at all that it was odd his being there. Now if you didn't send a man, it must have been the murderer because nobody else knew about Cyril's murder, did they?"

"That's a fact," the inspector agreed, "but I still don't see why you should jump to the conclusion that it was Mr. Paisley who was the murderer. So far as we know he had no connection at all with the murdered man beyond a casual acquaintance. And whoever it was, why should he go after Mrs. Loder's revolver since it was Mrs. Loder's revolver which had already shot the deceased?"

Triumphantly I could answer all these questions, with the exception of why Hugh Paisley should have murdered Cyril, but I felt the "why" would come sooner or later.

"He looks exactly like a plain-clothes policeman when he wears dark clothes and a bowler," I explained eagerly. "As a matter of fact, at the funeral I took him for a plain-clothes policeman. Ellen hardly knows him by sight and if he were wearing dark clothes that night so as not to be conspicuous he would look

so different from his usual self as to pass for what he told her he was."

" Yes, but why go to all that risk and trouble for a revolver when he must have had it all the time ? " the inspector asked with deadly patience.

Well, I took the plunge. Secure in my solution, I felt I could tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, leaving out only Charlie Weekes' share in it. I began from the point where I had picked up the revolver, thought it was Harriet's and sent Judy packing with it. I let Charlie come into the picture in telling me that he had seen a dark saloon whose number might have begun with an " L " and ended with a " 2 " knock the dog down and the driver pick her up and take her away.

" Naturally, if it hadn't have been for this and the number and description fitting in with that of Hugh Paisley's car, I should never have given him a thought in the murder of my cousin. As it was, I could think of no possible reason, I can't even now. I couldn't even get a single thread on to him to connect him with anything that happened that night until I heard about Ellen's new job and I was so surprised about this that I began to wonder if anybody could have any reason at all for wanting the girl out of the way. Then I remembered how amazed I had been at the way Sergeant Wrigley had sent someone to question the girl, when I had been with him the whole time and certainly hadn't heard him give any instructions of such a nature. Then once I thought of the mysterious plain-clothes policeman I thought of Hugh Paisley and this seemed to be the thread I wanted. If he was indeed the murderer and had been on the spot when I gave Judy the gun, he would know the reason I was anxious to hide it. He would know that I recognised it as Mrs. Loder's or as strongly resembling Mrs. Loder's.

In fact it wasn't Mrs. Loder's, so he went to get hers."

"But why, seeing that we were almost sure to check up on the gun that fired the bullet?" the inspector asked patiently, mercifully making as yet no comment on all that I had done to make things difficult for them.

"To make the gun Judy was carrying exactly like hers by filing off the number, or something so that she would recognise it at a glance," I said triumphantly. "Mrs. Loder's gun was notched as it happened. He knew she would recognise a similar revolver if it were similarly notched, and this is in fact what happened."

"And you think that Mr. Paisley was afraid the girl might recognise him or perhaps comment on his likeness to the man who questioned her?" Caldwell asked. "So he got her this job."

"I don't think he got her a job. I think he simply wrote from an address in London. I feel sure he will be waiting for her there and that unless we interfere in time it will probably be the last that is heard of her."

Inspector Caldwell turned and looked at me.

"If that's your honest opinion, Mr. Foster," he said sharply, "why didn't you prevent the girl going? P.C. Boon was there; it would have been a simple matter to have enlisted his aid. You could have told her we wanted a description of the man who questioned her, or anything to have detained her a little longer."

Naturally I lost a little of my bounce at this sensible suggestion. The fact that Ellen could have been prevented taking that particular train just hadn't occurred to me. In books one is always pursuing somebody and preventing murders in the nick of time and unmasking the real villain in the act of trying to polish off his last victim, but in real life, apparently, one acted more simply. One merely prevented the potential victim from walking into trouble.

We arrived at the terminus in excellent time, only a few minutes behind the train. I don't know quite what I was expecting. I had some vague notion of an escort of the flying squad who would escort us along the trail blazed and suitably indicated by those who had kept Joyce and Ellen in sight and that we should arrive just in time to foil Mrs. Gell's prophecy of "never a two without a three."

But in the usual unromantic way of things where I am concerned, Inspector Wrigley made straight for the station-master's office where I found Joyce and Ellen, chatting away amiably together while they waited.

It was perhaps fortunate P.C. Boon had been waiting for me and that Joyce had come up in the nick of time. Had I been allowed my head I would certainly not have dreamed of speaking to Ellen, but would have hidden behind a newspaper somewhere else in the train and have done my best not to let her see me, as though she indeed were the criminal flying from justice.

Joyce, however, had more common sense. She had made her way down the train until she had spotted Ellen and had matily sat down beside her telling her that she was going to London as well for the half-day and gradually had got Ellen to talk about her new job and had even got so far as Ellen saying that Joyce could

go along with her to satisfy herself that it was a nice and respectable place if she felt anxious about it.

However, at the terminus, they had both been stopped and told to wait in the station-master's office until we arrived.

I doubt if ever a domestic has started a new post with such an escort as poor Ellen had. The inspector decided to take her and find out if everything was straight and above-board, and because he didn't want me out of his sight, I went, too, and Joyce squeezed in as well.

On the way to the address which Ellen was making for, he put one or two questions to her.

"The plain-clothes man who questioned you on the night of the murder, did you let him into the flat?"

"Yes, sir, he rang," Ellen said unexpectedly.

"Did he ask if he could look round at all?" the inspector asked, which was a question that had not occurred to me.

"Why, yes, sir! He said he just wanted to make sure everything was all right, and that it was just routine and that I wasn't to upset Mrs. Loder by telling her her things had been looked through. He was quick and left things just as he found them."

"And now, Ellen," the inspector said in a business-like manner, "you're a sharp girl, I can see that. I want you to describe him to me, if you can. He obviously exceeded his duty in searching the flat without a warrant."

"He was tall and dark and wore dark clothes. A rather big man," Ellen said, frowning in an attempt at bringing him to mind again.

"M'm, that might describe several people I know," the inspector said doubtfully. "Can you mention anybody by name whom he resembled. Say, Mr. Foster here?"

"Oh, no!" Ellen replied promptly. "Nobody would take Mr. Foster for a plain-clothes policeman. I should say he was more like, let me see, a man who has been to see Mrs. Loder once or twice—Mr. Paisley," she ended triumphantly. "If Mr. Paisley had a moustache they would be very much alike, except, of course, Mr. Paisley speaks like a gentleman."

I gave an inward sigh of relief. Perhaps after all it wasn't going to be a damp squib.

"Now, Ellen," the inspector said as we drew up outside what was obviously a large, well-cared-for professional house though in a poor quarter. "I hope you won't mind if I interview your prospective employer. We just want to make sure everything is all right, and I will tell him that I know what a very good and sensible girl he is getting."

Ellen looked more thrilled than anything at the prospect and the inspector wangled it so that Joyce and Ellen stayed outside in the car with the driver while we interviewed Mrs. Spencer, only too obviously the hard-working wife and of hard-working doctor.

She told us that Ellen Fisher had been recommended to her through a London Agency; she had been trying to get a nice girl to help her in addition to the general help for some time. She looked anxious about it all, but the inspector managed in a marvellous way to reassure her, an art which had been a hidden one so far as my dealings with him were concerned. He had always made me feel distinctly uneasy.

"She's a good girl, Mrs. Spencer, and it was just in her interests that I wanted to make sure she was coming to a good place. One can't be too careful, especially when there has been such a lot of trouble in the family where she was employed."

Mrs. Spencer seemed to understand, apparently she knew about Ellen's previous post, and she was

pleased at the inspector's boosting up of her new help.

"You're on the 'phone?" he asked next, and took down the number. "Oh, and by the way," he suggested, "I should not let the girl go too far afield until this case is settled. She'll be wanted as a witness one of these days, it's better to be careful, eh?"

"I'll try to arrange it," she replied, and soon we were outside and Ellen was allowed to take up her new post with the inspector's blessing.

As for me, I climbed into the car feeling a perfect fool after all my melodrama.

"We'll try the agency she got Ellen's name from," the inspector said, giving the directions to the driver and as yet refusing to condemn me for the fool I must seem to him. "There may be a line there."

I was now hoping against hope. Again I was shown in along with the inspector as though I were a C.I.D. man and not mentally handcuffed to him, and again I shrivelled up still further, if that were possible, as the questions and answers proceeded.

The anti-climax to all my mysterious lurings to London to be done away with in Mrs. Gell's best manner, was that Ellen's mother, Mrs. Fisher, had written to the agency begging them to find a good post for her daughter to entice her away from her at present very undesirable post. Mrs. Fisher had promised to recompense them well and had sent loads of testimonials dating from the girl's schooldays, and including one from the vicar, one from the family doctor, and even one from the next-door-neighbour who was a very "superior" person.

So Ellen had been duly enticed away from her undesirable post with Harriet to one as an alleged receptionist. It sounded nice, but I could not help thinking, in between the gaps in my own misery, that she would

find it a very hard-working existence compared to her life with Harriet.

"Well, Mr. Foster?" the inspector asked as we emerged.

"Not so well, I'm afraid," I said, and I must have looked pretty abject for his cold eye seemed to melt one degree and he said:

"Anyway, we've found out that somebody resembling Mr. Paisley searched Mrs. Loder's flat without any authority. That's something, though we went in a very roundabout way to find it out," he added as if regretting the small bone he had flung in my direction.

"And what now?" I asked boldly, determined to know the worst. "Am I arrested?"

He paused thoughtfully on the pavement.

"You seem to have a knack of being useful in doubtful sorts of ways while you're at large," he conceded hesitatingly at last, "and in any case, we can always fall back on you if we're stuck," he added more brightly. "But I should advise you to stay put for a while, Mr. Foster. And if you would only let us know what you're up to half the time," he continued in sudden exasperation, no doubt remembering my list of follies, "we might get on a little quicker. I'm not mentioning the meddling with evidence . . . yet . . ." he emphasised meaningly. "You've put us on to this mystery plain-clothes man, and there's a possibility that investigation in that direction may lead somewhere. So, for the time being, Mr. Foster," he emphasised, "we'll leave a discussion of your lapse until a more suitable time."

Which, I suppose, meant that only if I succeeded in helping them to get quickly on to the track of the murderer, if I indeed was not that very much-wanted person, could I hope to escape full retribution.

The inspector sat in the front with the driver for the

return journey and I sat at the back with Joyce. She must have pitied my dejected countenance, for she suddenly squeezed my arm and said :

“ It was simply marvellous of you, Guardy, to guess that the plain-clothes man who questioned Ellen was phoney. I never gave it a thought, and nobody else did.”

Naturally, this helped the pricked balloon to inflate a little once more with its own importance, but when I came to weigh everything up in the privacy of my own study later on, I had to admit that none of it was due to my own shrewdness. I had relied on a Special Providence and it hadn't failed me. But for the merciful blessing of Ellen's anxious mother going a round-about way in getting her daughter away from what appeared a notorious and undesirable position, I should never have given the girl a second thought. In jumping to my melodramatic conclusion that she was being lured away, I had accidentally stumbled on to the slender thread which led to Hugh Paisley. What a detective I had been ! The clue of the plain-clothes policeman questioning Ellen too soon had stood out a mile, and yet I had simply put it down to Wrigley's ingenuity.

Of course, it might not lead anywhere tangible, even so. I had had too many setbacks to feel cocksure again. But I was not relying on myself now. For good or ill I had laid all my guilty cards on the table and the police were in full possession of all the facts. It was a consoling thought. It was a relief to think that I had not the eternal question hanging over my head of whether I ought to confess to what I had done, or not. I had implicit faith in Wrigley and Caldwell. Between them they would set to work and it wouldn't be long before everything was known to them about Hugh Paisley, even the puzzling “ why ” which had

so far kept him far from being the remotest suspect in the case so far as the police were concerned.

I began to feel so soberly confident that I sent for Weekes, hoping to share some of my optimism with him.

"I think I can say with certainty, Weekes, that no mention need ever be made to the police of your having been the first on the scene. I've had to tell about your seeing a car run Judy down, but all this will simply be to your credit, so I hope you won't worry any more about what you did and I'm sure, now that you have your chance, you'll be a credit to your wife and to all who wish you well."

This meant that I had to listen to further hoarse protestations concerning the spotless leaf he had turned over, and how Meg was pulling round fine now that she knew she had a regular wage and neighbours to come back to.

The poor little man meant well, and I hoped anxiously he would never lapse again ; he certainly had at this moment no intention of doing so. But now that I knew how easy it was to get hanged in a noose made solely from one's good intentions, I trotted out some useful maxims about looking before one leaped, and ends not justifying means, and two wrongs never making a right, for our mutual edification. Charlie was very grateful to me ; he felt that he deserved some sort of a lecture and I carried on until I realised that he was the type of man who only stole when he was hungry or somebody he cared for was hungry, so I cut my eloquence short and told him he could rely on me for a job until he got something better and even then he could always fall back on me if ever he found himself unemployed.

And bolstered up by this insurance against unemployment, he assured me hoarsely and earnestly that if

his still-born baby had lived, he would have called him " 'Enery," which, being meant as a compliment, was accepted as such.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MRS. GELL'S warning of " never a two without a three " fortunately did not come true, though Joyce, hating to see anybody disappointed, did stuff her up with some yarn about our rushing up to London with the entire police force to prevent Ellen being done to death because she knew who the murderer was, so that Mrs. Gell felt that she was right in all but the *fait accompli*.

It must have come as a terrible shock to Hugh Paisley when he was arrested three days later. I don't think he could have had the slightest inkling that any sort of line had led to him where the two murders were concerned, nor could he have known, as I knew from experience, that Wrigley and Caldwell were exactly complementary to each other. What one could not find out with his gimlet, the other could by a kind of pleasant suction, mild and harmless-seeming, which could nevertheless bring up refuse from apparently bottomless pits.

The whole story was a long one, as it was ferreted out bit by bit. Part of it was discovered by the joint and tireless investigations of Wrigley and Caldwell, part was deduced, and much came out at the trial, while the rest could be left to the imagination. Hugh Paisley pleaded " Not guilty " at the trial, but he was soon overwhelmed by the weight of evidence against him. Briefly, the whole sequence of events can be summarised as follows :

Hugh Paisley was known as a rich and successful

stockbroker, but there had come a time when he was hard pressed and stood the risk of crashing badly if he could not sell out some dud stocks before it was too late. He knew Cyril casually at the club and chose him for his sucker, dropping hints that he knew that a certain stock was being forced down with the object of a certain big financier buying up and making a pile out of it. "I'm going to be in on it," he had confided, after a few more whiskies, and had so whetted Cyril's appetite for a flutter on a get-rich-quick basis, that in the end Cyril had managed to worm out of Hugh the name of the stocks and also some others which Hugh Paisley said were promising. Very cleverly Hugh had said he could only promise to obtain a few shares for Cyril as he thought they were going to be bought *en bloc*, and Cyril, falling for this, had rushed round to another broker and had bought up as many of the different shares as he could afford, even though the broker tried to advise him against it. And as Hugh was the principal shareholder and his shares were put opportunely on the market, Cyril's money helped him to weather a sticky patch, and Cyril lost far more than he could afford and made matters worse by trying to retrieve his losses by joining in with George Padmore on a Stock Exchange "tip" the latter had received.

Once Cyril found himself in financial straits, he was not the type of man to take things lying down. He realised he had no way of getting at Hugh Paisley, so he set to work patiently to find out all he could about the man and eventually had the great good fortune to discover that Hugh Paisley had once traded under another name, many years ago, and in that name, his real one, he was an undischarged bankrupt. Cyril at once started making use of this information. He meant to blackmail Hugh Paisley until the latter had repaid all that Cyril had lost—with compound interest.

The three big sums which Mr. Rourke had mentioned as coming unexpectedly at different times to save Cyril's tottering fortunes had come from Paisley, and the latter had decided that this had got to end.

He had gone round to the Loders' home on the fateful night, dressed purposely in unaccustomed dark clothes, with a loaded revolver in his pocket and a clear plan in his mind, and had arrived just when the maid had driven away with the luggage—he had heard the address she gave—and had entered the house knowing that the Loders were parting and thinking that Harriet had already left Cyril. His plan was to try and corner Cyril, murder him, hide the body in some suitable place in the house, then leave it all shut up. He had walked straight in, leaving the front door open and Cyril had met him, looking as black as thunder and had snapped that he was a long time letting him have the money he had promised. Paisley had answered that he had brought it and Cyril had gone into the dining-room to get them drinks. Paisley had left his hat and gloves on the hallstand and had followed Cyril into the dining-room. Cyril had crossed to the wine cabinet in the recess near the window. At that moment there had been the sound of a car's back-firing in the road and at that second Hugh Paisley had shot Cyril in the back, killing him instantly.

Thinking that they were alone in the house, Paisley was confident that he would have ample time to dispose of the body in some suitable hiding-place where it might not be discovered for months, or certainly long enough to confuse the tracking down of the real criminal. He was about to search the house and grounds for a likely place when to his consternation he had seen Elaine Freer hurrying swiftly up the drive. Something like panic had seized him then and he had stepped hurriedly out of sight behind the heavy hangings of the

window on the opposite side to where Cyril's body was lying. He counted on her ringing and, getting no reply, going away.

But he had forgotten that the door was swinging wide open, and Mrs. Freer had stepped inside the hall and called in a low voice :

“ Are you ready, Cyril ? ”

Getting no reply she had opened several doors on the ground floor and eventually had stepped inside the dining-room. She had gone close up to Cyril's body with horror in her eyes, had stood gazing soundlessly down on it for a moment, then had turned suddenly and had almost ran from the house. It was growing dusk now and Paisley had just decided that he had better clear out, when he had seen someone else turn in at the gate. He had not paused to look who it was, thinking that perhaps Mrs. Freer had stopped the first passer-by for help. He had darted into the hall, seized his bowler hat and gloves and returned to the dining-room, glanced hurriedly round to make sure he had left nothing, opened the side window near Cyril's body and dropped out on to the gravel path which led up to the back quarters of the house, being careful to leap over the narrow strip of soil and shrubs directly beneath the window.

In his dark clothes he would not be easily seen in the dusk and he let himself out of the back gate which led on to a thoroughfare which gave ready access to the block of flats where he lived. He was crossing the road when a car came careering down and, as he jumped on to the opposite pavement, he recognised the car as Elaine Freer's and he had a very nasty moment wondering whether she had recognised him in the glare of her headlamps.

He had almost reached his block of flats when he found that the revolver was missing. He knew he must

go back and get it at all costs as he had not had his gloves on when he had fired it.

Cursing himself for his carelessness, he had turned back, feeling fairly certain that he must have dropped it when he leaped over the bed of shrubs beneath the dining-room window. He got back to the spot just in time to see me pick it up, fold it in my handkerchief, and put it in the rexine shopping bag, and give the lot to Judy to take home. This action of mine had rather taken him aback, I should not doubt, but then it perhaps occurred to him that I not unnaturally suspected that Harriet had killed her husband and that I thought the revolver was hers. He had loitered uncertainly for a few moments, heard me ask Harriet about Cyril's diary and had risked a glance in at the open window to see whether I discovered one or not, for it occurred to him that perhaps some record of Cyril's blackmailing activities might be contained therein. After he had seen me pocket the diary, he had hurried quietly away out of the back entrance once again and in a few minutes he got his car out and had taken a short cut to intercept Judy. While his fingerprints were on that revolver he dared not risk it falling into police hands and he had deliberately run Judy down, picked up the now dead dog, pocketed the gun and hidden Judy under the rugs of the car and returned the car to its place in the park without the porter, who was busy showing some prospective tenants an empty flat, having noticed it had been taken out.

And now he had to do some hard thinking. His plans had gone completely awry owing to being interrupted; he had got to make his own security double sure by incriminating somebody else. Suspecting that the revolver he had used must have been very much like Harriet's for me to have acted as I had done, he determined on a bold plan: to obtain, if possible,

Harriet's revolver, which he guessed would be at her new address, and substitute one for the other.

He knew how different he looked in his dark clothes and hard hat from how he usually appeared, so with the addition of a black moustache which he carried in a pocket of that suit ready for when he wanted to assume his real identity, and a coarsened voice, he felt pretty confident of his own ability to throw dust in Ellen's eyes. He had confidently gone to the block of flats he had heard her mention and soon found the number he required. Ellen had accepted him as a plain-clothes policeman, and had stayed dutifully in the kitchen while he made his quick search and found Harriet's revolver.

Back at his own flat he had changed into his ordinary clothes, and then had examined the two revolvers and found them identical with the exception of the notches and the numbers. The latter he did not trouble about, but notched the revolver he had used exactly as Harriet's was notched, trusting her to identify it from this, as had indeed been the case. Later on, when the coast had been clear, he had tossed it into the back garden of "The Cedars."

Then he had felt fairly secure, with the exception of Elaine Freer. At the funeral he had felt her eyes on him again and again and he remembered that his bowler hat and gloves had been on the hallstand when she had entered. Bowler hats and leather gloves were fairly common, but it was uncommon for him to wear them and had she noticed him in this unusual attire when her car had swept past?

On the top of this anxiety had come my question the following morning to him about a car similar to his having knocked Judy down and he knew that he had got to do something more than he had already done. Offering his services to Harriet to take all business

worries off her shoulders had kept him in close touch with everything that was happening, and when he heard that Mrs. Freer had been seen leaving "The Cedars" just at the time of the crime and knew she had not reported it, this gave him his idea. When he heard that she had for some reason best known to herself denied that she had been near the Lodgers' home that night, he rang her up and asked to see her, giving her to believe that he had seen her coming away while he had been on a social visit next door. She had met him the evening after the funeral and she had told him that she had seen a bowler hat and gloves like his on the hallstand and had seen him near their back gate, so that circumstantial evidence could point to him as much as to her. He replied at once that he was sure she would find that the bowler hat and gloves were Cyril's and still on the hallstand at "The Cedars," and eventually persuaded her to go with him to look, saying that if they were still there and she gave him the benefit of the doubt, then he would give her the benefit of the doubt, too, and neither need be drawn into what was going to be a very unpleasant business. Mrs. Freer apparently wasn't averse to going to "The Cedars." She said she would go if Paisley would help her to find some letters she had written to Cyril and which he might have kept. So long as Mrs. Freer entered "The Cedars" that was all that was necessary to his plan and the rest was pretty much how the police had deduced it to be.

If only he had left things alone. If only he had not gone back when he noticed the missing gun, how secure he would have been! And what an awful position I should have found myself in. But one can always rely on people with guilty consciences to overdo their caution and Hugh Paisley had proved himself no exception to this rule. It was he who stole the diary and later burnt it to make it look as though it had been

Elaine who had stolen it because there was something which incriminated her in it. Actually we never found out why Cyril kept that diary, or to whom it belonged. There certainly hadn't been anything in it to incriminate either Hugh Paisley or Elaine Freer. It was just that their names had cropped up along with George Padmore's at the various functions mentioned, and this had helped a little.

I was very thankful that Hugh Paisley had not been on the scene when Charlie had helped himself to the silver, or when I had returned it. This was a nice little stroke of good fortune from Charlie's point of view. I know when Paisley was being cross-examined at the trial and the full story was slowly dragged from him that I sweated for fear Charlie's lapse might be brought to light. But Charlie apparently also had a Special Providence which took pity on him occasionally. And the Gells think the world of him. They are convinced that he and he alone started the right scent when he gave us a clue to the car which had killed Judy.

The whole business, however, was a terrible strain to us all. The trial was a ghastly business, and the whole thing from the time I discovered Cyril's body seemed to have dragged on interminably so that one did not seem to be living an ordinary life.

When everything was all over, Harriet talked over her future plans with me and said that she thought she would go right away for six months or a year.

"I think it is a good plan, Harriet," I agreed. "You've been through a terrible ordeal and it will be better to get right away and give your mind a complete change. Only, keep in touch with me," I pleaded.

"Why, of course, Henry," she replied in surprise. "You've been like a rock of strength to me. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

A queer kind of rock, I could not help thinking, but it pleased me to think that that was her opinion.

"There's one thing, Harriet," I hesitated. "I was wondering if you could take Joyce with you? She's cheerful company and, you never know, you might do something about finding a rich husband for her. It would occupy your mind to do a spot of match-making for a change."

"Why all the sudden anxiety to get Joyce married?" she smiled.

"Well, I can't help feeling, Harriet, that she came this time with the express intention of getting to know about her inheritance, and I've been having to parry her questions. It was only because we were so worried about the murder and the trial that she piped down, but if I'm left alone with her she'll start all over again."

"But she'll be twenty-one very shortly, so why all the secrecy?" Harriet enquired. "She'll come into everything then. I'm not surprised at her wanting to know how much."

"That's just it," I said confessing at last to another boggy which has haunted me for years. "She doesn't come into a penny piece."

"You mean that you've supported her and made her an allowance all these years out of your own pocket?" Harriet gasped.

"Oh, I could well afford it, being a well-to-do bachelor of simple tastes," I replied. "But I hate to think that perhaps Joyce might feel under an obligation and perhaps stop taking her allowance. I have rather led her to believe that it was her own money, you know. She was twelve when her parents got killed in a road smash and she could remember the great style they used to live in. Unfortunately, Richard Dawson, with whom I had been friendly all my life, was a bit of a spendthrift. He earned an enormous salary and lived

up to it, never taking into account, I suppose, that he might die before the allotted three-score-years-and-ten. Joyce's mother was killed outright, but Richard lingered a few days and he knew that there'd be nothing for Joyce and he was in a terrible way, so, to set his mind at rest I told him I would see to her education and see that she got well started in life, so he more or less left Joyce to me in his will and pretty little else besides when everything was settled, although I kept her mother's jewellery intact for her."

"And you would prefer Joyce to think that what she has had has come from her parents, is that it?" Harriet asked.

"I should hate her to feel under an obligation. I'm so fond of her, Harriet, and she has brought more brightness into my life than I could ever have purchased with the money I've spent on her. I should hate her not to want to continue taking money from me. She seems to belong here somehow, but she's an independent-minded young woman."

Harriet thought hard for a moment, then her face suddenly lit up.

"That money which reverted to you on Cyril's death, Henry. It's yours now with no restrictions, and yet I don't suppose you like the thought of having it considering how it came. Couldn't you have the whole sum made over to Joyce? Lawyers can do all sorts of wangling, you know, and Joyce need never know that it isn't her rightful inheritance."

A load seemed to lift off my mind suddenly. It is queer how there is a simple solution to everything if one only looks for it in a simple manner. Cyril's money had savoured of blood money and I had not liked the thought of touching it. And Harriet, who surely knew in her heart that everything I had would one day be hers had suggested this way of getting rid of it.

I could have hugged Harriet. I felt suddenly a completely carefree man, which is a grand feeling when one has been weighted down with guilt and worry.

“ Let’s find Joyce ! ” I said eagerly. “ It’s high time she knew exactly how much she comes in to when she is twenty-one.”

THE END

